

付喪堂

骨董店

5

御 堂 彰 彦
イラスト◆タケシマサトシ

不思議取り扱い



Tsukumodo Antique Shop: We Sell "Mysteriosities" 付喪 堂骨董店—“不思議”取り扱います

Volume 5

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Prologue

There are certain objects in the world known as “Relics”

No, not like articles of fine art or antiques. They’re magic tools created by powerful magicians and mighty ancients, or objects that gained power after long exposure to their owner’s grudges and natural spiritual power—many “cursed items” were often times, in fact, Relics

They appeared in old stories, anecdotes, or legends as “objects of power.”

For example: a stone that brings good luck, a doll whose hair grows night after night, a mirror that shows you how you’ll look in the future, or a sword that brings ruin to anyone who draws it.

Most everyone has heard of stories like that.

People often consider Relics to be mere fantasies because they’ve never come across any. Even if a relic were right before their eyes, they’d fail to notice it. If a mysterious event were to occur, they’d just dismiss it as a coincidence.

Some simply don’t care, while others are certain that such things do not exist.

But Relics are real, and more common than people think.

Whether they bring about good or ill fortune depends on the ones who choose to use them.

Chapter 1 – Luck

Luck is a very subjective concept.

For instance, you might consider yourself lucky if you happen to catch the train at the very last second.

But if that same train later gets into an accident, the fact that you boarded it at all could only be seen as unfortunate.

Let's say that the accident then leads you to have a fateful encounter at the hospital. You could argue that boarding the train and getting injured was in fact, fortunate.

But if that fateful encounter results in bitter memories, you could only consider yourself unlucky.

Ultimately, the fact that you 'luckily' boarded the train ended being unfortunate after all was said and done. Of course, the reverse could have easily happened as well.

To put it bluntly, events aren't lucky or unlucky in and of themselves; that depends entirely on your point of view.

In other words, it's meaningless to even think about things that way.

But people still tend to end up thinking about everything in terms of luck...



I was all alone in my classroom, waiting for the teacher to arrive.

I was forced to stay after school to prepare the handouts for class tomorrow since I got to school late this morning.

That wasn't my fault though. I just had bad luck.

I overslept this morning...and don't tell me not to blame that on bad luck either. The only reason it happened in the first place was because my alarm clock never went off. It was working just fine yesterday, but then the battery died all of a sudden.

My luck really was the worst.

Train doors and elevators would always close in my face and traffic lights always turned red on me. In class, my teachers would ask me the things I just so happened to have skipped, and I

always made the wrong choice whenever I tried to guess the answer to true or false questions. I've never won any sort of prize or lottery either.

There had to be some sort of scientifically unprovable force giving me bad luck.

And now this.

I was born under an unlucky star. Not even the name my parents gave me in hopes of bringing me good fortune could change that.

“This sucks so much!”

I impulsively pounded on my desk and heard a metallic jingling sound.

It was the bangle I had bought the other day. I remembered what it was supposed to be and clicked my tongue.

Lucky bangle, my ass!

The fact that I was tricked into buying a fake like this was more proof of my bad luck.

“Ugh, what a useless...”

The classroom door opened just as I was about to rip the bangle off of my right wrist and throw it away.

It wasn't the teacher, but Kurata-kun, one of my classmates. Truthfully, he wasn't *just* a classmate; he was actually my secret crush.

“Kurata-kun, why are you here?”

“Ah, I'm supposed to help prepare handouts. Shintani was on patrol and caught me at the arcade last night. What're you here for, Toujou?”

“I'm also supposed to help with the handouts since I was late this morning.”

“Overslept, huh? That sucks.”

I would have said the same until just a moment ago, but if this meant I could be together with Kurata-kun, then my luck wasn't bad at all. In fact, I'd say things turned out pretty nicely.

“What's taking him so long, though?”

The door opened and Shintani-sensei entered the room just as we were starting to wonder where he had disappeared to.

“Are we ready? Alright. Kurata, Toujou, take these.”

I took the worksheets from him. *Don't try to touch my hand too, you dirty old man!*

“Kurata’s here because he was fooling around last night, and Toujou’s here because she was late for school. You brought this all on yourselves, you hear?”

That was rich, coming from a guy who was late just a second ago. I felt like asking if it was only OK when he was late. ...Actually, it would have been better for him not come at all. I wished he would just go away.

“Alright, let’s get started!”

My internal pleas were denied and he stepped into the room, slamming the sliding door shut behind him.

He might have closed it too forcefully, but the door suddenly disconnected from its rails and lurched forward.

“Behind you!” I yelled out to warn him.

The falling door slammed against his head just as he turned around to look.

Shintani-sensei ended up getting carried to the nurse’s office after he injured his head. Kurata-kun and I were told to go home as a result of that mess.

“I feel bad for Shintani, but we got pretty lucky this time, huh?”

“Yeah...”

I unconsciously touched the bangle on my wrist.

“Did it actually work...?”

I only got my hands on this lucky bangle yesterday.

It was a pretty horrible day and nothing was going well. I was even unlucky enough to completely bomb a test. Don’t tell me not to blame my bad score on my luck either. I’m not *that* stupid, if I say so myself.

In fact, all my answers were correct. They were just off by one line.

I hadn’t been *that* jumpy during the test and even double-checked my answers. I just didn’t notice that they were all in the wrong spots.

But the test was still covered in x marks when I got it back.

I must have been cursed by some kind of death god or poverty god when I was born. That was the only way any of this could make sense.

That was how I always thought about it anyway; I was already used to having bad luck.

Somewhat reluctant to bring the bad test home with me, I was wandering around town when I found myself in front of a small shop. I had inadvertently wandered deep into an alleyway without even realizing it.

The small, old looking shop stood alone at the end of the alley.

For some reason, I decided to go in.

The inside of the shop was just as dated as the exterior. Not dirty in any way, mind you, but a little lackluster. It felt like a perfect fit for me.

It was dotted with slightly creepy dolls, oddly shaped lamps and various other curios. I didn't know if they were secondhand goods or antiques or something, but they were definitely showing signs of age. I also saw several similarly shaped bangles lined up on one of the shelves. They were all c-shaped cuff bangles and had a diamond shaped stones set into them.

"Welcome."

The woman behind the shop counter spoke up. She was an eye-catching beauty whose appearance didn't at all match the whimsical feel of the shop.

"Are you looking for anything specific?"

There wasn't anything in particular I wanted, but I was curious about the bangles that I just saw.

"Just these. Why do you have so many of the same bangle?"

Everything else in the shop was unique so why they were the only ones that looked mass produced?

The shop lady answered as I was thinking to myself.

"They might look similar, but all they're all very different. No two Relics are ever exactly alike."

"Relics?"

"That's what they are—but they're not like antiques or classical art, you know? They're magic tools created by powerful magicians or mighty ancients. They can also be objects that have absorbed their owner's grudges or natural spiritual power after long exposure.

"They're pretty common, you know?"

"These bangles are also Relics just like stones that summon misfortune, cursed straw dolls, or three sided mirrors that show you how you'll die."

Going by what she said, this was a shop that dealt with miscellaneous fortune related goods.

"These bangles bring good fortune and although they look similar, their actual abilities are very different."

She walked towards the shelf with the bangles on display.

“One generates new luck for you if you share your own fortune with others, one transfers your future luck to the present, one converts some of your life into luck, and finally—”

She gently looked at me and quietly whispered.

“One lets you steal luck from anyone who touches it.”

I was shocked.

It was almost as if she knew exactly what was worrying me. It wasn’t like I hadn’t considered it before...if only someone would share even a part of their luck with me, who had been unfortunate since the day I was born.

Why were lucky bangles like these being put in front of someone as unlucky as me?

“So which will you choose?”

She asked and gestured at the bangles in front of me.

—

The bangle was attached to my right wrist when I left the shop.

I looked at it and remembered the words the shop woman told me before I left.

“Be careful not to steal too much luck from other people. Even if it leads you to good fortune, it won’t necessarily lead you to happiness.”



It didn’t happen often, but I wasn’t just sitting around today at my part time job at the Tsukumodo Antique shop.

Of course, it wasn’t because business was booming—not like something like that could ever happen.

It was actually because I was wasting time with the laptop in front of me.

My school had a computer class and we were spending a little time learning how to manage the OS, use spreadsheet programs, and all that stuff. That’s why I was allowed to temporarily borrow this laptop. Of course, it was restricted so that I couldn’t go to sites that high school students weren’t supposed to visit, but I could still use the internet.

I was using it to read up on current events and sports news.

“What’s so great about these things?”

Looking over my shoulder was the shop owner, Towako-san.

She exuded a dignified aura and would most certainly be classified a beauty if she were to act demure. Despite that, her face was warped into an inconsiderate grimace that looked like she was spitting out something unpleasant.

“What are you doing anyway? I have no idea.”

“Not much. I’m just reading up on current events. It’s pretty much like reading a newspaper or a magazine.”

“Then why don’t you read those instead?

“This is more convenient since I don’t have to go out and buy them one by one.”

“Then why don’t you watch TV?”

“But then I would have to watch it at specific times to see what I want.”

“It should be fine if you record beforehand right?”

“That’s not all you can do with the internet though. You can also order things online, you know.”

“But you’re ordering things, why not just do it over the phone? I generally don’t like making mail orders anyway since I can’t see the products in person.”

It was no good. She was an analog person through and through.

“Tokiya, you’re at work. You can’t just play around.”

The one who butted in this time was my fellow part time employee, Maino Saki.

Perhaps wanting to share her own opinion, she came over to look at the screen.

Her long pale hair, which shone silver in the light, spilled onto the keyboard.

“Careful, Saki-chan, that’ll pull your soul out.”

At Towako-san’s lie, Saki quickly pulled back as if she were frightened. Her face, however, was still the very definition of expressionless. She possessed a special ability where her emotions rarely ever showed on her face.



“That’s just a camera. The computer obviously won’t steal your soul.”

“I know that, it was a joke.”

“Really now.”

With that lack of expression, I couldn’t tell if she was joking or not.

“Anyway, you need to stop playing around.”

“Why? It’s not like there aren’t any customers here. I’m only borrowing it for a week anyway. Why can’t I keep using it?”

“If that’s the case, don’t you have something you should be doing?”

Saki dropped several books in front of me.

The books had titles like “With This, Even You Can Make a Homepage”, “How to Become a Popular Web Designer”, and “Techniques for Making Attention Grabbing Web Pages.”

Her book choices were unusual as always.

She often read how-to and self-help books but had the tendency to always choose ones that missed the mark.

“If you want to use it, why don’t you switch with me?”

I tried to get up from the seat, but Saki grabbed my shoulder and pushed me back down.

“You’re going to do it. I have other things to take care of.”

“You mean you couldn’t understand the books...”

“Ahh, I have so much to do.”

Saki gave a hurried response and ran away. Bull’s eye, huh.

But I wasn’t planning on making any web pages either way. Being able to use them and knowing how make them were two completely separate things.

I briefly flipped through the books, but soon shut them and went back to browsing the net. Resignation is truly the great lesson of life.

I stumbled upon a blog page after a while.

It was pretty common for people nowadays to publish things about their daily lives or hobbies for other people to read. It went without saying that celebrities posted things, but regular people were in on it too.

This one could be summed up as a blog and a fortune telling page. I indifferently took a look at it.

The post was about how amazing things started happening after the author bought a lucky bangle. None of the things they wrote about were particularly interesting though.

“What’s this?”

Saki, who had brewed some black tea, came over to look at the laptop monitor again.

“You were interested in fortune telling?”

“Not really. I just thought it would be nice to have one of these so-called lucky bangles, if they were actually real that is.”

“Is there something that makes you think you’re unlucky??”

“All the time. Like when I see the train door close on me right when I arrive at the station.”

“Why not just wait for the next one?”

“You should have checked the train timetable first.”

I flinched a bit at the nearby Saki and faraway Towako-san’s double retort.

“There’s also when stoplights turn red right in front of me.”

“Can’t you just wait?”

“Run before it changes.”

“Plus, I’ve never won any prizes in lotteries.”

“Isn’t working regularly at this store good enough?”

“I’m not going to raise your salary, you know.”

“I’ve never won the new year’s post card lottery either.”

“But if you don’t send any cards out, there’s no way you’ll win.”

“Did you even send out any in the first place? I didn’t get one.”

“Then why does my phone battery die whenever I really want to talk to someone.”

“Who’re you talking about?”

“You should have fully charged your battery.”

“Then how come the topics I study for are the only ones that don’t show up in tests?”

“I said, who were you trying to talk to!?”

“That’s why you should study everything instead of betting on getting the right questi...mm?”

The flow of the conversation broke and an awkward silence was born.

“Ahem...”Saki cleared her throat.

“Either way, it doesn’t matter. Everything Tokiya said depends on how you look at it.”

“It’s not about being lucky or unlucky in the first place. That’s just an excuse people use when they don’t do what they need to.”

I guess I wasn’t able to get them to sympathize with my misfortune.

“In fact, I think you’re lucky, Tokiya.”

“How so?”

It was true that I couldn’t counter her arguments, but I don’t ever remember being told I was lucky.

“Because you can work here at the Tsukumodo Antique Shop. There’s no greater fortune than that.”

Of course Saki, who was devoted to customer service and loved this shop, would say something like that.

Happiness, huh. Well, I guess being able to have pointless conversations like this could be called happiness.

“Well, maybe it is.”

“I know, right?”

“Yeah. I also get to work with you.”

“.....”

Saki froze up.

“Come on, if you don’t say something back, I’ll be really embarrassed.”

“I don’t care anymore.”

Saki picked up the black tea she just brought over and hurriedly went back to the kitchen. I didn’t even get to take a sip. While she was out, I heard the sound of something loudly being knocked over coming from the kitchen.

Errr...that didn’t have any deep meaning, but maybe she misunderstood me? I looked at Towako-san to confirm, and saw her looking at me with an unpleasantly wide grin on her face. I guess I really did make a mistake this time.

“You’ve come a long way, being able to say something like that.”

“It was just a joke!”

I offered a panicked explanation to Towako-san who headlocked me from behind.

“No—even as a joke, it’s still a step forward you know.”

“I said I don’t know about taking steps forward *or* backwards...Towako-san?”

Towako-san’s headlock tightened for some reason.

“Towako-san...this is starting to hurt...”

But perhaps she didn’t hear my voice or something, because it tightened even more.

“Towako-san!”

I managed to pry myself away from her arms with brute force.

“What was that!?”

She continued to stare at the laptop screen as if she couldn’t hear any of my complaints.

“Towako-san?”

“This...might actually be a relic.”

On the laptop screen was the blog page along with an image of the “lucky bangle”.

There are certain objects in the world known as “Relics”

No, not like articles of fine art or antiques. They’re magic tools created by powerful magicians and mighty ancients, or objects that gained power after long exposure to their owner’s grudges and natural spiritual power—many “cursed items” were often times, in fact, Relics

They appeared in old stories, anecdotes, or legends as “objects of power.”

For example: a stone that brings good luck, a doll whose hair grows night after night, a mirror that shows you how you’ll look in the future, or a sword that brings ruin to anyone who draws it.

Most everyone has heard of stories like that.

People often consider Relics to be mere fantasies because they’ve never come across any. Even if a relic were right before their eyes, they’d fail to notice it. If a mysterious event were to occur, they’d just dismiss it as a coincidence.

Some simply don’t care, while others are certain that such things do not exist.

But relics are real, and more common than people think.

I was also recently involved with some relics, a bottle that strengthened or weakened presences, a piercing that let you hear the voices of peoples' hearts, and a ring that allowed you to see the red string of fate tying you to your soul mate.

"This is a relic?"

"Yeah, it looks like one."

I magnified the image and Towako-san stared at it some more.

"I still can't make out the finer details though"

"What kind of power does it have?"

I could tell from Towako-san's expression that it wasn't simply an object that gave its wearer good luck.

Relics weren't always purely beneficial, there are also some with what could be called negative side effects.

"Lucky relics, in essence, conveniently distort the predetermined future just a little bit. They're items that are capable of granting small wishes in a sense. However, there are several patterns that their abilities can follow."

"Patterns?"

"Bangle shaped lucky Relics can be divided into several types, with their powers also varying. One transfers your future luck to the present, one steals luck from others and in exchange for making someone else unlucky, your own luck increases. One converts some of your life into luck, and one generates even better luck for you if you share your fortune with others."

I felt like I understood what she wanted to say, but was a little unclear on how the compensation worked and how the bangle's effects manifested.

What was luck actually defined as?

"Should I give a few examples?"

Seeing my confused expression, Towako-san offered some concrete examples.

"Let's say you want to score well on an exam. You should have gotten 50 points by guessing on the multiple choice questions but got 80 points instead. Lucky, right? But then you only get 50 points in a future exam where you should have gotten 80 points. The end result is that the luck remains the same. This is the pattern where you borrow luck from the future. But you'll still never get everything right if you only depend on intuition to answer the questions. There's a limit to what luck can get you. Like I said before, lucky relics bend fate just a little bit, so that good things occur."

"Next is the pattern where someone else's luck gets stolen. Let's say you were destined to get to get 50 points and someone else was supposed to get 80. The owner of the bracelet who was originally supposed to earn 50 points now gets 80. In exchange, the person who was supposed to get 80 points now gets only 50. The total amount of luck hasn't changed, but as far as the person with the bracelet is concerned, they just got lucky."

"As for the pattern where you exchange your life for luck, well, that one's pretty straightforward. In exchange for one year of your life, you get 80 points where you should have gotten 50. I'm not sure of what the actual exchange rate would be though."

Of course, in addition to being blessed with the luck to get all your guesses right, you could also have the questions you studied for show up on the test, or have the teacher misketch a question in your favor. There are lots of ways this could go."

"However by that logic, wouldn't you get 100% if you actually answered all the questions? Like if you take the exams where you would have scored 10 points in the future and add them all together, wouldn't you get a score of 100 where it should have been 0?"

"So you'd think. However, the amount of luck that people have in one lifetime is fixed. In the same way, the amount of luck that you can use at one time is also fixed. For example, if you have a multiple choice exam with four options for each question, what are the chances that you'll guess every single correctly?"

"Ummm..."

This was starting to feel like a statistics lesson...

"The probability should be pretty low... I think?"

"Well I don't have the exact number either, but that's about right, chances are pretty low. It's not just a matter of having to luck the score 10 points in the next 10 exams. You also need to consider the probability of it all showing up at the same time. Luck is the same, in order to get 100 points on the exam you would have otherwise scored zero in, you would need an extraordinary amount of luck. If you're talking about your entire life's luck, sure. However, people are only able to use one part of their life's luck at a time"

"Like even if you have a bathtub full of water, you can only drink the amount your stomach will hold?"

"I can't say that's a brilliant analogy, but it's something like that, yeah."

"So rather than being lucky, can this relic be thought of as something that increases the probability of your wishes being granted?"

"You could also say that since having something with low probability occur is what you would call having good luck."

“I see.”

“But that’s not where the problem lies.”

“You’re right.”

The problem was figuring which pattern this relic followed. It would be fine if this was the type that redistributed luck, but any of the other types would be problematic.

All the more so if they were unknowingly using its ability.

“Can you tell which type this one is?”

“Not just by looking at this picture.”

This bangle had a silvery pattern engraved on it and a single diamond shaped stone set in the center.

“I’d need to look at the stone. You can tell what kind of ability it has by looking into it, but...”

Towako-san said that there were several lucky bangles so they probably all looked the same except the stone.

I scrolled down the web page and took a look at the other blog posts.

“Something really nice happened today. I won a prize in a magazine prize contest that I entered before.

“I forgot to do my homework, but the teacher came late. I was able to copy someone else’s homework in that time, safe!”

“I bought some juice from the vending machine, but got an extra can. That was the first time in my life this happened. It was a little embarrassing cause I stood out, but how lucky!”

“My good luck has been getting recently even though my fortune said it was going to be bad this month. Maybe it’s because of this bangle I bought before.”

The blog was updated pretty much every day, but the author only added included images to their meaningless updates every once in a while.

If I went back further, the entries were mostly about how things didn’t go well for them, but after they recently got their hands on the bangle, it was all about how lucky they were.

The exact date the bangle was purchased wasn’t written anywhere, but judging by the blog posts, they got it about two weeks ago.

“If it weren’t for this bangle, these events could all be dismissed as coincidences.”

Towako-san said this as she looked at the screen. I agreed with her.

Was this a real relic bringing her luck, or was it just a fake?

I looked away from the blog.

The author was someone name "Yukie". I didn't see a last name or kanji, and there wasn't any proof that this was her real name either. She did write that she was a high school student, but there was no information on what grade she was in or even what school she went to. Although it sounded like she was a girl, there really was no telling people's true genders on the internet. Her hobbies were fortune telling and reading, with her favorite book being a foreign novel.

Amongst all of that, there was one thing that caught my eye.

That was an entry titled "My Favorite Shop".

"That's the shop that sells miscellaneous fortune telling goods, right?"

Saki interjected. She was probably listening in on our conversation earlier.

Although I didn't think we'd be able meet "Yukie" so easily, we did now have some sort of clue. There was some value in looking into it for now.

"Why do you know so much about it, Saki? Are you into fortune telling?"

"Cause I was doing research on rival stores?"

"Rival stores, huh. Since when have we been a fortune telling store? Oh wait, a fortune telling store and an unfortunately selling store. They *are* actually pretty similar."

Towako-san hit me as I agreed with Saki.



I would have never imagined being invited by Kurata-kun.

We started getting along a lot more since that incident with Shintani, and this was the first time I had been invited after school like this.

But I couldn't get my hopes up. There had to be a pitfall waiting for me somewhere; that's how it always went.

My bad luck would come and ruin things just when I thought everything was going well.

It happened often enough that I believed it.

I was walking next to Kurata-kun. We weren't holding hands, but walking together back from school with my crush was still a dream come true.

But as happy as I was, I couldn't help also being a little uneasy.

I couldn't afford to have something like bad luck ruin this. Not after I had finally gotten together alone with him.

I unconsciously looked at the bangle on my right wrist.

—steal luck from anyone who touches it.

The words of the shop lady came back to me.

I was pretty sure the teacher touched it that day. Shortly after, he was met with misfortune and I got the chance to get along with Kurata-kun. It almost felt like I had stolen the teacher's luck.

I tried stealing people's luck little by little after that day, and it felt like my luck had increased even more.

Despite my initial doubts, I was now convinced that this bangle did indeed have the power to call forth luck.

But I wanted even more.

I wanted enough luck so that no one could interfere with my time with Kurata-kun.

Of course, I couldn't do anything like stealing luck from him. I needed to find someone else as a replacement.

That's when I saw the two people a little ahead of us walking in our direction. I was going to shift myself slightly towards these people as they passed by and bump into them on purpose.

“Kya!”

I ended up bumping into them harder than I expected, and stumbled as a result.

I'm going to fall. Just as I was about to lose my balance, I found myself supported by pair of strong arms.

It was Kurata-kun.

“Are you alright?”

“Th-thank you.”

What a happy accident. I thought I messed up by bumping into them too hard, but was lucky enough to be helped by Kurata-kun.

“I'm sorry, are you OK?” The person I bumped into apologized.

“No it's alright. I should be the one apologizing. Please don't worry about it.”

Because you just let me take your luck.

The distance between Kurata-kun and me lessened even more after he came to my support.

Since he didn't seem to mind, we continued cuddling and walking like that.

I was feeling really lucky right now.



Towako-san let us get out of work early and at Saki's guidance, we were headed towards the store that Yukie said was her favorite. On the way there, we passed by private high school. This was the only high school in the neighborhood. Since "Yukie" usually stopped by the store on her way from school, it wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility for her to be a student here.

The going-home club had already left, but there were still people in the middle of their club activities here and there.

There were also few couples wearing school uniforms walking towards us from the opposite direction.

It looked like the students here wore sailor uniforms. I was just thinking that they wouldn't suit Saki's taste since they were mostly white when—

"What are you staring at?"

Saki warned me.

"Oh, nothing much"

As I turned my head towards Saki, I accidentally bumped into a girl who was passing by.

"I'm sorry, are you okay?"

I hurriedly apologized to the girl that I had just bumped into.

The girl accepted my apology with a smile and continued on with the guy that she was with.

"What's this?"

Saki spoke up and picked something up from the ground. It was a student handbook.

"Did that girl drop it?"

She looked at the picture attached to the handbook and pointed to the girl that I had just bumped into.

As I thought about returning the handbook to her, I noticed something glittering near her hand.

“...is that?”

On the girl’s right wrist was the bracelet we saw on the blog page.

I looked at the name on the student handbook and saw her name, *Toujou Yukie*, written on it.

What a coincidence, coming across the author of the blog, “Yukie,” like this.

Not letting this chance pass us by, Saki and I followed after her. Toujou and the boy she was with crossed the pedestrian crossing.

Just as she approached the crosswalk, the light turned green and she continued across. I had hoped to catch up to her while she was stopped at a red light, but it looked like that wouldn’t happen.

We need to hurry.

I increased my walking pace and continued towards the pedestrian crossing.

The crosswalk signal began flashing; it was changing faster than expected. I clicked my tongue. We probably wouldn’t make it in time if we continued walking, so we ran across the pedestrian crossing.

We were now a little closer, but Yukie continued on and showed no sign of noticing us. The distance between Saki and me had also increased a little bit, but we continued to tail Yukie.

“At this rate, all we’re doing is following them.”

“I know, I know.”

My goal wasn’t to follow them. What I wanted was to confirm whether that bangle she had was a relic or not, and to do that, I would have no choice but to talk to her. Although I knew what I had to do, I couldn’t just shout after a girl I didn’t know. I needed to mentally prepare myself first. More importantly, she would probably be cautious if I shouted after her all of a sudden.

I looked at Saki.

“You should be the one to yell after her.”

“You’re right, she would probably cower away if Tokiya, as a guy, suddenly started shouting.”

I’m sure plenty of people would also shrink away from your expressionless face, I thought, but didn’t say out loud.

Toujou-san had gotten further away while we were talking. I hurried after her in order to close the distance between us.

She went to the next pedestrian crossing and once again, the light turned green just as she approached. She crossed the street without waiting.

We increased our pace the same way we did before and the pedestrian crossing light began flashing again. This time, it actually turned red before we were completely able to cross. The cars honked for us to hurry up and began moving the moment we crossed to the other side.

Because the lights turned green just as Toujou approached them, they were already red by the time we reached them. If we weren't careful, we'd lose sight of her and get separated by the crosswalks.

Toujou crossed a four-way intersection and once again, the pedestrian crossing lights began flashing when I tried to go after her.

I quickly turned left at the intersection and began running. Saki, who didn't come after me, fell behind a little.

"Let's go!"

Halfway through crossing the road, I turned around to look at Saki and saw a faint look of terror on her face.

"?"

I turned back around. A large shadow was barreling towards me, obscuring the left side of my vision. It was a truck making a left turn. The driver probably didn't see me at all and showed no sign of slowing down.

He finally noticed me there after turning and slammed hard on the brakes.

He wasn't going to stop in time.

I kicked at the ground and bolted across the pedestrian crossing as fast as I possibly could.

The truck just barely avoided hitting me and stopped in the middle of the pedestrian crossing. I got away with little to spare.

"Are you alright?"

Saki came over to me shortly after.

I told her I was OK, but really, that scared the life out of me.

Although I wasn't injured, we completely lost sight of Toujou because of the crowd of onlookers that ended up gathering around us.

—

"How'd it go?"

We were back at the Tsukumodo Antique shop and I was giving Towako-san a report on the situation. I couldn't say for sure what kind of power the bangle had, but I suspected that the bangle she owned had a high chance of being a relic.

After the incident with the truck, I sent Saki back first and took several round trips from the school gates to that traffic light.

The first time, I had to stop for a red light twice and was able to cross without waiting once.

I was stopped at a red light all three times on the second run.

For the third, fourth and fifth times, I got stopped at the red light once, and was able to cross twice at the green light without waiting.

I was testing to see if I would be able to cross every street without waiting on the red light the same way Toujou-san was able to.

For now, I could say that I did not have the same success she did even after making a total of five trips. Although it probably would eventually happen if I tried a few more times, hitting a green light every time wasn't something that happened often, my own bad luck notwithstanding.

Perhaps she was in a hurry and wished that nothing would get in her way. Then, due to the relic's power, she luckily ended up not getting caught by any traffic lights.

Of course, this could also have happened to just be a lucky day for her, but if this was related to the luck-summoning bangle, it had to be more than just a coincidence.

"The problem is that we still don't know which type of bangle she has."

"That is indeed the only information we're missing."

"What if I said the reason I almost got hit by the truck was because I became unlucky in her place?"

I did bump into her once before. Couldn't she have stolen my luck then?

"That's still not conclusive enough. Although you could certainly say that she wasn't stopped at any traffic lights because she stole your luck, it's still at a level where you could call it a coincidence. As far as the thing with the truck goes, it's only to the point where we can say that you just had bad luck."

Towako-san's thoughts weren't too different from my own.

If I talked to her directly, perhaps she would let me look at the real thing and maybe I would know then. However, we weren't able to judge from the information we had, as expected.

I would try confirming again tomorrow.

I went to visit Toujou-san's school again the next day and was a little out of breath since I ran out as soon as the last homeroom ended.

Toujou had left school late yesterday, but that didn't necessarily mean she would be late today, which was why I had to hurry. I passed by students going back home as I walked from the station to the high school. I kept walking with my eyes peeled so I wouldn't miss her by accident.

I caught sight of her walking alone among the students. Her hairstyle was different from yesterday, so I almost didn't notice her.

She passed by me a short distance away. I turned around so I wouldn't lose her and began to follow. Perhaps she was going someplace else today, but the route she was taking today was different. Like yesterday, she smoothly continued walking without getting stopped by any traffic lights. It really was like she was guided by luck.

Perhaps I was also getting used to tailing people; it seemed I wasn't getting stopped at all by the traffic lights today.

Getting better at stalking people is kinda...

I was feeling just a little concerned for my future but continued to observe Toujou-san so I wouldn't lose sight of her. She didn't have to stop at any traffic lights until she reached her destination.

The place she stopped by was a silver accessory store. Saki said it was a miscellaneous fortune telling store, but this place looked like it dealt with accessories. Unlike Tsukumodo it had a fashionable feel about it, and the inside was overflowing with high school girls on their way home from school.

So that's what popular stores look like—Toujou walked towards the counter as I thought to myself.

As I watched her from afar, she bumped into some people who were trying to get in line right behind her. She cheerfully allowed them to go before first. When Toujou-san went up to the register to pay, the employee clapped his hands for some reason.

I strained my ears. It seemed her receipt had been entered into a lottery, and that she had won a prize. I saw her happily celebrate her good fortune.

After that, she headed towards the station, boarded the train, and finally looked like she was heading home.

The station she got off at was the same stop as Tsukumodo. She left the station and went to the toilet. I couldn't follow her there, of course. I waited, pretending to look at the train table, and thought.

Considering the thing with the traffic lights and the prize that she won at the shop, there was no doubt that she had especially good luck.

However, I couldn't tell which type of bangle she had with those observations alone. There was also no way around the fact that "luck" itself wasn't something that could be strictly defined.

I probably wouldn't make any progress even if I continued observing like this. I needed to talk to her directly. But what could I say to get the conversation to turn to the subject of relics?

I was still pondering my options when she came out of the bathroom.

I waited a little bit before following and went through the ticket gate next to hers. She suddenly stopped at the gate.

Thinking that even she had her own small moments of unluckiness, I looked at Toujou-san only to find her staring right back at me.



"Ugggh."

I was feeling bummed and let out a sigh.

It was because of yesterday's date...if you could even call that a date.

Just thinking about it made my heart sink.

Kurata-kun invited me to hang out at the arcade while two of us were alone together after school.

That was fine in and of itself, it's not like I hated arcades or anything. But then Kurata-kun met up with his friends at the arcade, and in his excitement for the coin game, pretty much forgot that I was there. I also took a shot at the coin game when he asked me to and won thanks to the relic's power. He seemed pretty happy when I split the coins with him.

But something was wrong. This wasn't the image I had in mind. I had imagined us chatting about each other over a meal or something. After he finished playing at the arcade, he invited me to come with them next time and we separated from there. Kurata-kun then rode on the back of his friend's bike and went home.

I was headed in the opposite direction and sadly had to go the station with some of Kurata-kun's other friends.

Everything had been perfect until we got to the arcade.

It was supposed to be just the two of us, without anything or anyone interfering.

If that was what he had in mind, then we shouldn't have gone together.

The difference between my elated feelings before we got to the arcade and my rock bottom feelings right now were literally like heaven and earth.

All the love that I held for him before had disappeared and sunk away somewhere. He was an unexpectedly childish brat who couldn't even read the mood.

He was just a kid who found playing with his friends more fun than pursuing romance. I might have actually been happier before, when I still admired Kurata-kun in secret. As I thought, I had a disposition for misfortune. Even the person I fell in love with turned out to be someone like this.

I remembered how Kurata-kun invited me to go with him tomorrow as well. It was already too late to take it back now, but that didn't bother me.

Farewell, Kurata-kun. Farewell, my love.

But still, for the person I fell in love with to be someone like him, I really was unfortunate. I spent what little pocket money I had left on impulse buys, but that didn't make me feel any better.

“?”

I felt someone's eyes on my back and stole a glance behind me.

He's still here...

It was a boy wearing a uniform from another school. It felt like he had been there since I left the school. The uniform wasn't one that I usually saw on my way to and from school, so it stuck out. That's why I remembered it.

He walked behind me the entire time and even sat a little distance away from me in the same train compartment.

I had a bad feeling and stopped to pretend to use my phone. When I did that, he also stopped walking as if he were looking at something.

A coincidence? But he was always behind me like that.

Maybe it was just my imagination that I was being followed.

I could call someone. But then it would be embarrassing if I were wrong.

I headed towards the ticket gate entrance while I tried to figure out what to do. He started following after me again.

I feigned passing through the gate and deliberately did not enter.

The alarm rang, and I stopped moving.

Even though he already inserted his ticket and should have passed through the gate, the person following me stopped halfway and looked at me.

I knew it. He was following me.

I took a deep breath and glared at him.

“...what do you want?”



“...what do you want?”

She was glaring at me with suspicion in her eye. I must have been openly looking at her too much.

“Ah, you see...”

“You were also at the shop, weren’t you?”

Thinking about it now, I bet it was because I was wearing a uniform from a completely different high school at the shop and on her train home. I probably stuck out like a sore thumb.

Not only did I get off at the same stop she did, I also waited until she came out of the restroom before going through the ticket gate. That would have made me look all the more suspicious if she had noticed me before.

She wasn’t saying it outright, but I definitely looked like a stalker right now.

Toujou-san looked towards the station employees when I didn’t respond.

Not good.

“Here!”

I quickly took out the student handbook I had in my pocket.

“I found this on the ground and thought it belonged to you. I should have returned it right away, but I was having a little trouble telling if you were really the person in the picture.”

“Ah, that’s my...”

She was a little less suspicious of me now.

"I dropped it on my way to school yesterday and was looking for it...but where did you find it?"

"Oh, near your school..."

"Is that so? Thank you, I appreciate it. But why what brought you near the school in the first place?"

She stared at my uniform and school bag. It was true that my school was nowhere near the one she attended. Saying that I happened to be passing by would sound like a lie.

"Ah, well, you see, the truth is, I work part time at a place that's kinda like a general store. The store you went to has a similar atmosphere to the one I work at, so I go to visit it sometimes. I bet it's strange for a guy like me to visit shops like that, huh."

I was running my mouth trying to find something to talk about.

"Really? Yeah, that store's really good; I also go there a lot. Don't see why there would be a problem with guys going there either."

Her suspicion completely disappeared after I praised her favorite shop.

That made things easier. I continued the conversation without letting my relief show on my face. I couldn't let this chance escape me.

"That bangle's cute isn't it? Did you buy there?"

"Oh, this? No, I got it from somewhere else. It's a lucky bangle."

"Could you let me see it for a second?"

I took her hand and stared at the bangle.

Due to the poor lighting. I couldn't see much when I tried to peer into the stone.

I looked at her to ask if she could take it off and let me look at it more carefully when...

"....."

She somewhat embarrassedly looked away from me.

Her gaze then turned to her own left hand.

That's when I realized that I was gripping her hands with all my strength.

"S-sorry."

I panicked and let go of her. She didn't complain and only quietly muttered that it was okay.

"Are you interested in things like this?"

“Eh, ah, yeah. I was thinking about making something like it at my shop as well. That’s why I’m looking at various shops for research.”

“You’re saying that employees at that store make things themselves?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“You can do stuff like that at a part time job? Woah.”

“Well, it’s still just something I was thinking of doing, you know.”

For now I was frantically thinking of what to do next while keeping up with the conversation.

“Heey.”

“Welcome back, Tokiya-sa....”

Saki, who came out as she usually did, froze mid-sentence.

“Ohh, so this is where you work, Kurusu-kun. How strange and interesting.”

There was no doubt that Saki recognized the person coming in after me as Toujou-san.

“Tokiya, come here for a second.”

Saki gestured for me to come over to her with her finger. I excused myself from Toujou-san and obediently went over to her.

“What is this?”

“Well, it’s kind of a long story, so...”

“Make it brief.”

“Yes ma’am.”

I meekly relayed to Saki how I went to Toujou’s school to follow her, and getting easily exposed, which resulted in me taking her to the shop.

I myself wasn’t sure how the conversation ending up with me bringing Toujou-san to Tsukumodo, so I could only reply vaguely. However, that was more or less what happened.

“So she caught you following her?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“Let me guess. You mixed yourself in with the students as they left the school, and openly followed her wearing a uniform from a different school, didn’t you?”

“It’s exactly as you say.”

“You need to read this then.”

Saki handed me a how-to book titled “With This, Even You Can Become a Detective!”

I no longer thought about why she would even have something like this. She was too far gone.

“There’s more that I want to say, but let me tell you this first.”

“What is it?”

“You’ve been bringing too many girls to this shop recently.”

...Really? I didn’t think I brought *that* many over though.

“Hmm, I guess we could take this opportunity to turn them into customers. We might be able to add to our sales.”

“Don’t forget what our actual goal is, okay?”

“I know.”

“Because Towako-san’s away right now.”

“Seriously, of all time...what bad timing. Is she out buying stuff?”

“No, I don’t think so since she said she was going to only going to be away for a little bit.”

Oh well. I guess that meant the job of verifying if it was a Relic fell to me since I already knew about the pattern in the stone. I hadn’t planned on bringing her in the first place anyway; the original plan was to check it myself.

I couldn’t keep Toujou-san waiting for too long, so I went back to her.

“This shop has all sorts of things doesn’t it? Not just accessories.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda like a general store.”

All we had were fake Relics anyway.

“If you find something you like, you can have it. Nothing too expensive though.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yep. But if I had to ask for something in exchange, could you let me see that bangle for a little bit?”

“Sure.”

I properly borrowed the bangle from her this time and tried to look through the stone —

—and couldn't see anything.

According to what Towako-san told me, I should have been able to tell what kind of bangle this was by looking at the pattern inside the stone.

What if this wasn't a relic at all, but an ordinary bangle?

“What's up?”

Toujou-san asked while I was staring at the stone.

“Ah, nothing much. I was just thinking that this is more elaborate than I first thought.”

“Do you want to make one like it?”

“Huh? Oh, right. Yeah. But I wonder if I'd be able to make one?”

I remembered the conversation we had earlier and nodded in a fluster while responding with the first thing that came to mind.

“The shop owner might give me some advice on how to make one if I asked her, but she's away at the moment. Could you let me borrow this if she doesn't show up soon?”

“Borrow the bangle?”

“Is that no good?”

I was going to ask her to wait until Towako-san came back or ask her to come back tomorrow if she said no, but Toujou-san easily agreed.

We then waited for another hour, but she didn't return.

Actually, I thought that she might have returned but just didn't come into the shop, but when I went to check her room and the underground warehouse, she was still nowhere to be found.

In the end, I decided to borrow the bangle.

“Could I ask you one last thing?”

I asked her a leading question as we separated.

“Do you know what Relics are?”

“Yeah. They're like antiques right?”

Her tone was proof that she wasn't aware of what they were.

“Looks like this bangle is the type that exchanges luck.”

That was Towako-san's judgment when she looked at the bangle after returning to the store.

"But why couldn't I see anything when I looked inside the stone?"

She must have seen through my implication that it could be similar to the fakes she always bought, but Towako-san raised one of her eyebrows and skillfully circled around me. Almost as if she were hugging me from behind, she held up the bangle in front of my eyes.

"Keep looking at it reeaally carefully."

Towako-san slowly rotated the bangle and held it at different angles.

I stared at the stone just as she instructed while, very conscious of the fact that she was stuck to me. Then, I saw something that looked like a pattern in the stone where there was nothing before, I unintentionally shouted a little and leaned forward, but then the pattern disappeared again.

"I told you, don't move."

Towako-san grabbed my head to fix it in place, and began moving the bangle around one more time.

The pattern reappeared again in the otherwise blank stone when after it was held at a specific angle.

"Can you see anything?"

"I can see...a cross"

Satisfied with my uncertain answer, Towako-san separated herself from me and looked down at me with a triumphant hump.

"Told you so."

I didn't know how long exactly, but I guess her many years of experience with Relics hadn't been for show. Rather than any frustration, I felt a newfound admiration for her.

Not only that, she was also able to determine why type of Relic it was just by looking at the pattern in the stone.

"So this is the type that gives you greater luck in the future if you share your good fortune with people now?"

"Yep."

I knew it. The lottery she won in the store was the result of her actions.

It didn't look like she had shared her fortune while she waited for the traffic light, which meant that either winning the lottery was just a coincidence, or she already shared some of her luck and that was her reward.

But if that's how it was, then the misfortune I had yesterday wasn't because my luck was stolen. It was entirely because I just had awful luck. Somehow, that was another shock.

"Well, if that's the way things are, there's no need for us to worry about it."

"Yeah. Still, it's a little concerning that there always has to be some compensation with these Relics."

Towako-san took a breath as she handed the bangle back to me.

That was a relief for now. I decided I would return the bangle to Toujou-san tomorrow. There was one thing I wanted to confirm before that, though.

"Towako-san, did you actually want to keep this Relic?"

She was a Relic collector who often went to great lengths to buy them.

It didn't seem like there were many she wanted, but maybe this was one of the few she did.

I asked her with those thoughts in mind.

"Nah, maybe I'd want it if it were something that granted my wishes as I imagined them, or if it were powerful enough to alter the effects of other Relics."

"Oh. You want relics like those?"

"Eh? ...Yeah. Well, it's not like I need something vague that simply improves luck."

Towako-san certainly didn't seem like someone who would depend on something vague like luck. She had a certain manly decisiveness about her.

"What is it?"

"Nothing much. I was just thinking of how manly you were."

"You do realize that's not a compliment right?"

"Of course."

I jokingly laughed and finally put the bangle in my school bag—

"Uwaah!"

My eyes met with Saki who was peeking out from the sitting room with her face half hidden.

"Y-you scared me. What are you doing?"

“Nothing.”

Saki said that, but looked at me with cold eyes. There was a hint of dissatisfaction on her otherwise expressionless face. I somehow could guess what she wanted to say.

“...guess there’s no helping it.”

I circled around Saki just like Towako-san did for me, held up the bangle in front of her eyes, and slowly rotated it.

“H-hey...”

“Don’t move your head, it’ll disappear. Pay attention, can you see what’s inside the stone?”

Really, acting like this at her age just because she was left out.

I sighed to myself while Saki looked for the pattern inside the stone set into the lucky bangle.

After staying silent for a while, Saki took a small step back.

“Are you having trouble seeing it?”

“I’m OK. I’m looking at it carefully right now. So stay still.”

Putting it like that made it sound like I had a choice in the matter. I was also pulled down with her when she leaned forward.

“...are you done yet?”

“Just a little more...”

Saki seemed happy and continued staring into the stone.



Something really nice happened today. A guy called out to me on my way home from school.

Perhaps this was the start of my new love, a blessing from the heavens after my heartbreak.

He is, no doubt, my soulmate.

After all, he knows about Relics—

I updated the blog without writing the last sentence. The part about Relics was a secret between just the two of us.

I thought he gave off a creepy feeling when I thought he was following me, but when I talked to him, he was nothing like that at all. In fact, he seemed like he had a nice personality, and had a good looking face to boot.

He was also interested in my bangle.

There were also other people who had taken notice of it before, but they were only interested in it as an accessory.

He was the only person that understood what it really was.

But that's because he was special. If fated encounters really existed in the world, then surely this was one of them.

This is truly a lucky bangle. Not only did it bring me luck, it also brought me a new love.

But I needed to become even luckier so that there wouldn't be a repeat of what happened with Kurata-kun.

That's why I wouldn't get too deeply involved with him right now.

I even lied a little to get away from him today. It's all for the sake of being as lucky as possible for our next meeting.

We made a promise to meet again.

That's why I need to stockpile luck for the sake of that moment.

Even if I have to steal it from other people.

All for the sake of my happiness—



I went to Tsukumodo right after school the next day and waited for Toujou-san. We agreed to meet after school yesterday, but never decided on a specific time. I eventually ended up waiting two hours in the shop wondering when she was going to arrive.

Since there was work to do at the store, I didn't really have any problems waiting. In fact, there were many more customers than usual today, leaving me with little free time.

“Is it because of this?”

I carefully looked at the bangle on my wrist.

I wasn't wearing it for any particular reason, but it seemed to be having some effect. Either that, or this was a complete coincidence.

...nah, there's no way this shop would suddenly become busy through sheer coincidence. It was probably blessed with luck due to this bangle's power. But quite frankly, I couldn't say for sure that the store was doing better because of my luck. It wasn't like winning the lottery or something where I could clearly say I was lucky.

"Thank you very much."

I saw Saki thank some customers and finish dealing with them without any problems. It had been a long time since I saw her looking after any customers. She was still as expressionless as ever, of course, but still looked lively somehow.

"Ah, whatever."

I took back what I thought about her before; that's just how she was.

I didn't think it would be appropriate to interfere with her work.

Leaving the customer service to Saki, I decided to use the internet on the laptop since the rental period was about to run out.

Come to think of it, I hadn't checked Toujou-san's blog since then. I pulled up her blog from the browser history—

"He is, no doubt, my soulmate."

I heard a voice read the last line out loud and hid the laptop screen in a panic. But judging by Saki's chilly gaze, it was clear she already knew whose blog I was looking at. I hadn't even noticed her standing behind me.

Just as I had gotten better at tailing people, Saki had gotten better at erasing her presence and standing behind me. We were both showing improvements in useless skills.

"I-it's not like she has to be talking about me, you know."

"You're right. She didn't write who she was talking about. It was just someone she met on her way back from school."

"E-exactly."

"Anyway, please get back to work, Mr. Soulmate."

Her voice dripping with sarcasm, Saki went back to work.

I took a sidelong glance at the blog. This was yesterday's update, no question about it.

...What the hell. Soulmate? Why would she write something like that? Well, if she were superstitious, I guess it would make sense for her to see it a destined meeting.

But Saki also seeing it was plain bad luck. I'd get in trouble if I tried to slack off now.

I was just about to close the laptop and get back to work when—

“Eh?”

The comment section of her blog caught my eye.

“What luck? How stupid.” “My luck’s been terrible ever since you started getting ahead of yourself.” “Meeting you was unfortunate, more like. You’re so delusional, it’s gross.” “We all know you give everyone bad luck.” “Go die.” “It’s your fault everyone’s so unlucky.” “You’re bad news.” “Toujou, you bitch, I know this is you. Don’t think you can get away with breaking your promises like that. I had a really bad time because of you and I’ll make you pay for that tomorrow. After you’ve taken responsibility for everything else.”

The abusive comments continued on and on.

“What’s up with this?”

I told Towako-san about the malicious comments directed at Toujou-san and asked for her opinion.

She inferred what I meant with my vague question

“Like I said yesterday, this Relic can only exchange luck. It doesn’t have the ability to make its owner unlucky. Of course, that also means there aren’t any side effects.”

“Not to doubt your judgment, but what if it had some other ability?”

“You sound pretty doubtful to me.”

Still, Towako-san didn’t take offence and looked at the stone inside the bangle one more time before shaking her head.

“The answer’s the same as yesterday.”

“I see...”

“Well, it’s not like I know everything about Relic abilities myself. I’m sure there’s something I don’t know or could have overlooked. What do you think?”

At her prompt, I told her what I thought.

“I know you said that this type of bangle doesn’t have any side effects, but what happens if the luck can’t be exchanged? Will the owner become unlucky instead?”

“Nope.”

“OK, so there’s no chance of something happening if someone were to lose the bangle?”

“What do you mean by *something*?”

“You said that people have a fixed amount of luck in their lives and that there’s an upper limit that can be used at any one time, right? Assuming that those times are set intervals like every month, or every year or something. Then it would be fair to say that the amount of luck that can be used within those time periods is also fixed, right?”

“If she loses the bangle after having lucky occurrences one after another, wouldn’t that mean it’s going to be followed by a series of unlucky events?”

“Makes sense, I never even considered that. I won’t say it’s impossible...”

“Then...”

“...but I can’t say it’s probable either.”

She gave me a vague answer.

“The only thing I can say for sure is that we’ve done enough.”

“Huh?”

“If what you’re saying is correct, then the fact that this is happening to her is because her good and bad luck are being balanced out? That’s how it has to be. On the other hand, If you’re wrong, then this is just a coincidence – no, actually, I’d say it was inevitable this time.”

“Inevitable? You mean her being targeted like this?”

“That’s not what I’m saying. Something unfortunate was bound to happen because of her excessive good luck—even if it had nothing at all to do with the Relic. It’s because people aren’t meant to stay lucky for so long. It’s no surprise that especially fortunate people tend to be envied and disliked by everyone around them.”

It was true that you couldn’t be lucky for your entire life. Where there was fortune, there was also misfortune. There was no such thing as never having to go through unlucky events. If there were people who had especially good luck, people envious of that fortune were sure come about.

I understood her logic just fine. The fact, was, however, that this abuse started after I borrowed the bangle from her. I couldn’t believe that these events were unrelated and that there was nothing I could do since it was just a coincidence.

“Tokiya.”

Saki, who had been silent until now, spoke up.

“Let’s go to her school and return the Relic. You won’t feel better unless we do that, right?”

She was right. I had to return this bangle as soon as I could.

The longer we waited the longer she would be unlucky.

Saki and I headed over to Toujou-san’s school. Quite a lot of time had passed since school ended. The school grounds were deserted and there were barely any active clubs at this hour. I saw several lights on the first floor of the building, but pretty much all of them were turned off on the second floor.

Toujou-san had probably already gone home. Despite the comments were written on her blog, there wasn’t any commotion indicating that something had actually happened. Still, I couldn’t get myself to calm down.

I looked towards one of the classrooms with the lights and decided to ask one of the remaining people when...

“...Toujou-san?”

The very person we were looking for came into sight.

When I saw that she was in the school infirmary, the bad feeling that I had became even worse.

Perhaps she heard my voice, but Toujou, who was sitting on the chair looked outside. When she saw us, she approached the window with a surprised expression.

“Kurusu-kun...why...? Oh right. I promised to go to the store today didn’t I? I’m sorry. Something urgent came up.”

“That’s alright. Umm, is that an injury?”

When I casually asked about it, she responded with an expression like it was no big deal.

“Oh this? Don’t worry about it. I just slipped on the stairs and injured my hand.”

“Your hand? Did someone...”

“Not at all. It was just an accident. Really, it’s not that bad.”

She had a bandage wrapped around her left hand. There was a little blood leaking into the bandage. Maybe the fact that the injured hand was the one that had the bangle was a sign...but maybe that was just me overthinking it.

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

“Oh...it’s just that...I was thinking you got injured right after I borrowed the lucky bangle from you...”

“No way that has anything to do with it.”

Toujou-san denied it with a laugh; she didn’t seem to have much faith in the lucky bangle’s power. I guess that was only natural since she was treating it as just an accessory.

“Sorry about that. I should have told you I couldn’t come, but I never got your contact information. Do you want to swap email addresses now?”

She took out a cellphone. Since I didn’t have any reason to refuse, I also took out mine.

“Can your phone use infrared?”

To be honest, I didn’t really know that much about the phone’s functions.

“Give it here.”

She easily handled my phone and exchanged addresses with me using infrared with experience that suggested she had used was used to doing this.

“Now you just need to confirm it.”

“Alright. But first I need to give this back to you.”

I took the phone back from her, put it back in my pocket without checking it, and handed over the lucky bangle. Rather than exchanging contact info, this took precedence.

She took the bangle from me and slipped it over her injured left hand. Just like she said before, the injury didn’t seem too bad.

“Sorry for all the trouble.”

“No worries. Umm...do you want me to take you back home?”

I was still worried about the malicious comments on her blog.

“Sorry, I’ve got a few things to take care of, plus I’m waiting for someone.”

“Ah, I see. Well, see you later then.”

“Yeah. I’ll be sure stop by the shop some time.”

Saki and I separated from Toujou-san and left together.

“Good for you.”

“Yeah, I’m glad her injury wasn’t too bad.”

“Not that...her phone number.”

“Huh?”

“...forget about it. More importantly, what are we going to do now?”

It didn’t sound like she was asking if we were going to go back to the store.

“Toujou-san’s Relic just exchanges her luck. It might make her a little luckier than everyone else, but no one’s is going to be cursed with bad luck even if she overuses it. There shouldn’t be any issues with letting her keep it.”

Towako-san was the one who confirmed the bangle’s power. Since Toujou-san’s injuries were light, I might have just been worrying too much. I was still concerned about the comments on her blog, but seeing that she was alright made me think it wasn’t going to turn into anything big.

“I see...”

Saki didn’t seem too satisfied with my answer.

“What are you thinking about?”

“...I noticed this reading the blog, but she always used to write about how unlucky her life was. Then, after getting the bangle, it felt like she started writing about how amazingly lucky she was all of a sudden.”

“Yeah. She got a Relic to increase her luck. Wouldn’t that be natural?”

“Really?”

“?”

“Toujou-san would have to do good deeds every day in order to exchange that for good luck right?”

“Well yeah, isn’t that what she was doing?”

“Her good deeds get exchanged for luck. You’re saying that like it’s completely obvious, but even if she knew about the Relic’s ability, it’s not like she’d do nothing but nice things for people. She would think it was just a superstition.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Tell me, how did she manage to get lucky every single day without knowing anything?”

“You’re saying that she took advantage of the Relic’s power knowing that her luck would increase if she did good deeds? She told me she didn’t know anything about Relics.”

“What makes you believe that? How much do you really know about her?”

“Well...”

I couldn't explain why I believed her.

"Hey, Tokiya. Were you doubtful of this Relic's power? Or did you feel guilty when Toujou-san became unlucky after you borrowed the Relic from her?

I couldn't answer Saki's questions right away.

Yeah, maybe that was it.

Maybe my hesitation was born out of my guilty conscience.

"I'm sorry. It's not like I really doubt what Toujou-san was saying, but didn't you think something was off?"

"Yeah, I agree. You're right."

Why was I trying to convince myself that it was all over? We hadn't resolved anything yet.

I certainly couldn't say that my guilty feelings were gone, but that didn't mean I could accept the current situation. Just doubting things wouldn't do us any good.

The Relic that Toujou-san had was definitely one that was only capable of bringing good luck. But according to the blog comments, there were still people who ran into misfortune because of her.

Not only that, even I was unlucky enough to almost get run over by a truck the first time I followed her. I don't know if she actually stole my luck when I bumped into her that day, but we were too hasty in just dismissing it as a coincidence.

...there was no way to say for sure. That was only natural since we couldn't confirm something as vague as good or bad luck to begin with.

The only thing we could say for certain was that the Relic she had was one that exchanged luck.

...but that was the problem. Nothing unfortunate was supposed to happen to her as long as she used the Relic correctly.

Then, I saw something unexpected in the distance.

It was Toujou-san.

We saw her in the infirmary a moment ago, but there she was, running with a tense expression as she disappeared behind the school building.

"She's over there!"

A voice rang out and Toujou-san ran towards the gym

I no longer had any time to sort out my thoughts.



I was running for my life.

It shouldn't have ended up like this.

What went wrong? Why was this happening to me!?

I only borrowed a little luck from everyone.

All the bad luck was just too much, it was unbearable. I would never be lucky if I didn't borrow luck from other people.

“Where did she go!?”

I heard someone shouting for me.

I ran towards the gym.

“Found her! She’s over there!”

Another shout, followed by the sound of people running. They were all chasing after me.

Kurata-kun’s voice was also mixed in with the crowd’s.

This was all because of what happened yesterday. I promised to go to the arcade with him yesterday, but decided to ignore him afterward since I wasn’t interested anymore.

He then went to the arcade without me and took a huge loss on the coin game. The problem was that he had borrowed some money from his upperclassmen bragging that there was no way he was going to lose. As a result, he ended up owing a large amount of money to his upperclassmen.

It would be nice if that was all there was to it.

I didn’t care if he and his upperclassmen lost money. Wasn’t my problem.

But he still blamed that loss on me, and demanded that I pay him the money he lost.

Why was his loss suddenly my fault!?

It was because Kurata-kun had his eyes on my lucky bangle; I told him about it on our first date. Of course, I didn’t tell him it was actually a Relic with special abilities, so there’s no way he could have known that.

In other words, it was just a pretext; he just wanted an excuse to extort money from me. But even if I pointed that out to him, nothing would change. He wouldn’t settle down until he took the money he lost back from me.

I was eventually cornered behind the gym. Kurata-kun and his goons glared at me.

“Hey, say something!”

Kurata-kun pushed my shoulder. I lost my balance and fell. But that was good luck for me, and bad luck for him.

Because I got the chance to steal his luck.

“You’ll get unlucky if you touch me!”

The moment I said that,

Boom!

There was the sound of something exploding in the incinerator behind the gym. It looked like someone had left a spray can in there.

I didn’t suffer any damage at all since I was lying on the ground. But Kurata-kun, who was still standing, got blown away by the explosion and had debris rain down on him. He fell to the ground clutching at his face; I could see the blood between his hands.

Several people ran over to him.

“What are you laughing at!?”

One of the girls in the crowd grabbed my hair and tried to force me to stand up.

She touched me. *I stole her luck.*

“Oww!”

She let out a yelp and pulled her hand back. There was a hair pin stuck in it.

“That’s why I told you I would make you unlucky.”

My hair fell down with a swish. I glared at them from between the strands.

“What? Looking at me like that. Do your worst!”

The explosion must have put them on guard, so this time, they forced me to stand up against my will and tossed me into the gym.

I slid across the floor as they threw me into the building. The rest of the crowd followed shortly after.

They surrounded me and began kicking me.

Group bullying.

Violence.

Going through terrible experiences like this. I knew it, my luck awful.

It really was the worst.

I needed even more. I would never find happiness if I didn't steal even more luck.



What was going on?

I couldn't make any sense of the scene happening before my eyes.

Before I could even think to help her, I felt a twinge of doubt.

Why did unlucky things happen to people around Toujou-san?

Was it really just a coincidence? No. There's no way it could be. Something like this couldn't be just a coincidence.

Then what was it?

It had to be, I decided, because of the Relic's power.

But it was strange. That particular Relic was only supposed to exchange luck. The more she shared her fortune with others, the more she would be blessed with fortune.

There's no way she would have been able to increase her own luck by stealing it from others.

But how else could you explain what was happening now?

That's right. She must have brought bad luck to other people through her own free will.

You'll get unlucky if you touch me—

Those words supported the disastrous spectacle in front of my eyes.

Why? Why was Toujou-san acting like that now?

My thoughts were in disorder. None of this made any sense.

But there was only thing I could say for certain.

I must have made some sort of mistake—

It all started when we came across the bangle on someone named Yukie's blog.

The bangle was actually a relic that had the ability to call forth luck.

I then happen to run into the blog owner, Toujou Yukie by chance and followed her. There I saw how she had the luck to cross the street every time without once waiting for any traffic lights.

The second time I followed her, she was once again never stopped at any lights. This time I succeeded in making contact with her and ended up getting the opportunity to see the relic she had in person. I then confirmed that it was a relic with the *ability to bless the user with greater luck if they shared their current luck with others*.

In other words, there was no chance that she was stealing luck from other people.

But there were still lots of comments on her blog from people claiming that she made them unlucky. Until a moment ago, we thought those were comments from people who were jealous of her. But the events happening now only lent credence those comments.

But the relic she had was only supposed to exchange luck.

If that weren't true, then it would mean that Towako-san made a mistake.

That was the premise we had and it was supposed to be absolute.

...but was it really? Was it really absolute? Seeing as something that absolutely wasn't supposed to happen was occurring before my eyes, there's no way it could be.

So then was there some other possibility? In addition to being able to exchange luck, was it possible that should make other people unlucky at the same time?

If that was true, then everything would make sense.

If she had two different Relics—

But there was an inconsistency in that line of thought.

Certainly the original premise was that the relic she had was one that exchanged luck. But that didn't necessarily mean it was the only Relic she owned.

But I already thought of that earlier and ruled it out.

However, the current situation could not be explained by her owning two Relics. And that was because it would mean she was deliberately giving everyone bad luck.

Why? It was because she didn't know anything about Relics. There was no way she could have intentionally cursed people with bad luck if she didn't know anything at all. That would mean she somehow learned about relics after we met yesterday.

But that wouldn't match chronologically with the comments on the blog. She had been causing people to become unlucky much before that.

But then that wouldn't match the fact that she didn't know anything about Relics.

There was a counter argument for every single one of my ideas.

What was I supposed to believe—?

Saki's earlier question came back to me.

If I considered what she said, then it would mean that Toujou-san was lying. If that was the case, it would make sense that she already had both a Relic that exchanged luck *and* a Relic that stole luck from others.

But that couldn't be possible.

She didn't know anything about Relics.

That was proven when I asked her about it at Tsukumodo before.

I actually *did* have a reason to believe her.

I didn't tell Saki this. No, I was worried about the issue we had before and couldn't tell her. The truth was that I committed a breach of protocol when I asked Toujou-san if she knew about Relics.

I was using a relic that could hear the true voices of people's hearts, Mind's Voice.

Not even I was that stupid.

I didn't think someone who was abusing the power of a Relic would easily reveal what they knew in their first meeting with me.

That's why I took Mind's Voice from the underground warehouse while we were looking for Towako-san.

The Mind's Voice was my proof. She really didn't know anything about Relics.

That's why I knew she wasn't deliberately using a Relic that could cause misfortune.

But the present situation didn't reflect that.

How was I supposed to explain what was happening now—?

Then, Saki spoke up next to me.

"Hey, Tokiya. It's strange."

"Yeah, that relic shouldn't have brought bad..."

“Not that.”

Saki shook her head.

“Look at her hand.”

“Her hand?”

I looked at Toujou-san’s hand.

On her hand was...

“—it’s not there.”

I looked at it one more time to makes sure. It was definitely missing.

There was something missing from her hand that was supposed to be there.

The bandage.

The bandage that was supposed to be wrapped around her hand from earlier was missing.

Had she taken it off? No, she didn’t have any scars on her hand. That injury had been enough to make her bleed.

That wasn’t the only thing. There was one more difference between the girl in front of me and the one in my memories.

I knew Toujou-san had an injured left hand. There was no doubt since she used my phone with her right. I remembered her putting bangle over her injured, or in other words, her left hand.

But the girl in front of us had the bangle on...

“Her right hand...”

What did that mean?

I finally realized where I went wrong.

I took out my cellphone to confirm my thoughts.

I needed to confirm her contact info, no, I needed to confirm her name that she exchanged with me through infrared earlier.

There I saw...

“Toujou Sachie”

I saw both the kanji and the way it was supposed to be read.

Then who on earth was the girl being bullied in front of us?

The voice behind me answered my thoughts.

“Yukie!”

I turned to the girl who shouted behind me—Toujou Sachie. The girl being bullied before our eyes,—she called her Yukie.

“Onee-chan.”

Only then did I clearly understand what had happened.

There were in fact, two separate Relics.

But there were *also* two separate Relic owners

The first was the one who owned the Relic that exchanged luck, Toujou Sachie. The other one was the one who had the Relic to steal other peoples’ luck, Toujou Yukie. She was also the one who was running the blog.

I was trying to think of two different people as one.

That explained the discrepancies between the blog and reality.

The person I followed the first day was probably Yukie and the one I followed on the second day was Sachie.

Right. There probably wasn’t any point in saying it now, but the two of them were like peas in a pod.

Then another question popped into my head.

Who was that soulmate of hers that showed up in the blog?

If we assumed it wasn’t me, then...

“Man, things are looking pretty bad here.”

Then, one more intruder showed up at the gym.



My older sister rushed into the gym first followed by another guy and a girl that I didn’t know. The person who entered last was—

“...Shun-kun?”

He was the person I met yesterday, the one that knew about Relics. He was just my type and I knew he was the one for me.

I was certain he had come to save me.

“Help me!”

I shouted for Shun-kun and desperately reached out. I couldn’t rely on my sister or those other strangers. I was going to depend on my soulmate.

“Oh my. And I thought I told them not to get involved with you.”

“You! Did you know this was going to happen!?”

Why was Kurata shouting at Shun-kun? Were the two of them friends?

“See, I heard them planning to give you a bad time in front of the convenience store and I tried telling them not to get involved with you. I told them you would bring bad luck.”

“You weren’t specific at all! None of this would have happened if you had just told us!”

Kurata-kun held his blood covered face and laid his anger bare.

“You’re the one who didn’t believe me. You’re the one who didn’t listen when I told you to stay away from them.”

Shun-kun laughed lightly.

“I didn’t warn you guys not to approach her because I was worried. It was only because it would be a pain if it ended up causing a commotion. Well, at least it’s just a pain and not something that’s impossible to deal with.”

He was just someone I met yesterday — that’s it.

He knew about Relics and said he collected them

He was just my type, my soulmate — or so I thought.

But that was all wrong — all wrong. He didn’t come here to help me.

The only thing he had his eyes on was my Relic. He didn’t care about anything else.

Shun-kun looked behind him.

Then, a girl who had remained behind him until now showed herself. She was a small girl, short enough to keep herself hidden behind his back. She took a step forward with downcast eyes.

Who was she?

Before I could ask, my eyes fell on the item she was holding. It was a musical instrument of some sort.



It looked like a flute, or maybe an ocarina. It was small enough to be held in the girl's small hands, but was roughly made and couldn't be called pretty at all.

She looked at Shun-kun once to confirm.

He simply nodded in response.

The girl quietly raised the instrument to her mouth and softly blew into it.

"Now, who will lady luck favor, I wonder?"

Shun-kun sneered.



Suddenly, a painful noise rang inside my head—

We were still inside the gym, but I was now looking up.

A countless number of glittering objects dancing down.

It took me a few seconds to realize that they were shards falling from the shattered glass ceiling.

The deadly glass shards rained down from above, shining like jewels

My entire field of vision was dyed red

—but that didn't happen in reality.

I owned a relic that showed me images of the future.

My right eye was artificial.

A Relic named "Vision" had been implanted where once my real eye had been.

"Vision" would show me the immediate future. However, it wouldn't just show me all of the future. I couldn't foresee the winning number of a lottery, or the winner of a sports match. Not even the weather. I couldn't see any future events at will either.

But there was one type of future I always saw without fail.

That was, when I or someone I knew was in danger. At those times, it showed me the moment of their death.

When that happened, a pain would run through my head, much like static TV noise, followed by a cut-in of the future. That's when I would take another action other than shown in the vision to try and prevent the predicted death.

“Run!”

I yelled out the moment I came back to my senses.

Crack!

Something cracked over our heads. No, it was the sound of something shattering.

The ceiling in the gym was specially made with reinforced glass. But that didn’t change the fact that it was still glass.

I knew what was happening without even needing to look.

This is what Vision showed me happening.

I knew what was going to break.

I knew what was going to rain down from the ceiling.

I knew exactly what kind of horrible event was about to happen.

But I didn’t have any time to raise my eyes, nor did I have the ability save everyone.

I began to move without thinking.

Grabbing Saki next to me, I fled to the corner of the gym as fast as I could.

I ran with her and took refuge underneath the second floor walkway in order to avoid getting directly hit by the glass shards. However, I overshot and slammed the back of my head into the wall.

My head shook violently.

My head was knocked back and my field of vision turned towards the ceiling.

I looked upon the shattered glass raining down. I felt like I could hear Saki silently screaming in my arms.

The falling glass shards cut into the students standing on the gym floor.

The world was dyed in red.

Nothing at all had changed from the scene that Vision showed me.

Without even having time to grit my teeth at how powerless I was, I lost consciousness.



“Ah....uggh....”

I couldn't understand what was going on.

The ground was covered in countless shards of glass.

Kurata-kun and the others were collapsed on the floor, covered in blood.

The ones that were still conscious were writhing on the ground clutching their faces and heads.

I, on the other hand, was completely unhurt. There wasn't a scratch on me.

The glass shards were spread all around me, almost as if they had avoided me.

But I wasn't the only one safe.

There was glass all around my older sister, Sachie, and she didn't suffer a single injury either.

And—

“Congratulations. It seems Lady Luck did smile on the two of you.”

Not a single shard had fallen in the area where the widely grinning Shun-kun and the girl next to him were.

“How nice. The two of you are safe.”

Shun-kun stepped on the glass shards and walked towards us.

“It's all thanks to this lucky bangle.”

Shun-kun first held up Sachie's hand with the bangle.

“You're usually nice to people, I suppose. Thanks to that, you were able to come out unharmed even in a situation like this.”

Next, he held up my hand with the bangle.

“You were saved because you stole their luck. If you hadn't done that, maybe a few of them would have also come out safe.”

I couldn't say that wasn't true.

I couldn't think enough to argue. Perhaps it really was true.

Finally, after holding up both of our hands, Shun-kun spoke.

“How do you feel? —how does it feel being the only ones without any injuries?”

We flinched at his words.

"Everyone else ended up so hurt. Well, there was one guy who skillfully managed to get away, but just about everyone else is badly hurt. All because they didn't have that special luck that you two have."

Was he blaming us? The two of us especially lucky sisters who managed to get away unhurt.

"The only difference between you and those guys is that Relic. But while you guys are unhurt, everyone else is badly injured. How horribly unfair. How do the two of you feel as you look at this awful scene?"

The first to move was Sachie.

She pulled away from Shun-kun, took off the bangle, and threw it at him.

"I don't need this. Why should I? It's just something I bought from a 100 yen shop."

"Ahaha. A hundred yen shop, huh. I guess that makes you luckier than anyone else huh. Getting ahold of a Relic by sheer coincidence. Wait, or would that be bad luck?"

Shun-kun turned his eyes to me.

I took the bangle off as if possessed and gave it to him just like Sachie did.

"Now you know. Being unfair is dishonest, isn't it? I'm glad we came to an understanding."

Shun-kun took the two bangles, got up, and left without incident with the girl in tow.

"...I'm glad." I let out a sigh of relief.

I didn't need it anymore. It was all that bangle's fault that I had to suffer through this.

"...I'm glad." Sachie muttered the same words I did.

"I feel bad for everyone, but I'm glad you're alright, Yukie. It's all thanks to that bangle."

Thanks to the bangle?

But I thought all of this happening to us was the bangle's fault...

People had different ways of accepting good and bad luck.

I couldn't understand it.

Why did my older sister think that way?

Maybe we had different amounts of luck to begin with. Maybe that's why she could see this as fortunate, because she always had lucky things happen to her.

...My eyes fell onto the injury on Sachie's hand.

I panicked a little when she fell down the stairs, but I should have stolen more of her luck after all.

But I couldn't do that anymore.

Losing the bangle like that...I knew it. My luck really was the worst.



Everything had already ended by the time I regained consciousness.

Ambulances had to be called and teachers gather in the gym, turning the incident into a huge commotion. However, we weren't brought in for questioning thanks to Sachie explaining that we were completely unrelated.

I finally got the chance to talk to her after everything calmed down.

From listening to her story, I learned that Sachie and the owner of the blog, Yukie, were identical twins.

She had gotten ahold of the bangle completely by chance, and in her words, didn't know anything about Relics.

Yukie, on the other hand, bought hers at a certain shop and did in fact know about Relics. She might have gotten it from that sister shop that Towako-san talked about before.

At any rate, it was ironic that the twin sisters ended up with related Relics completely independently. I could only say this now that everything was over, but maybe the fact that there were related relics was the biggest hint we had for this incident. Well, I might have realized it if I had been more perceptive.

Just as I figured before, the person I followed on the first day was Toujou Yukie and on the second day, I followed Toujou Sachie.

The fact that we found Sachie's student handbook while we were searching for Yukie was a complete coincidence. Now that I thought of it, she did say she lost her handbook *on her way to school*. We found it after school had ended.

Did Yukie also feel like she was lucky? Or did she regret her misfortune when she thought about how she lost the Relic?

The blog didn't get any updates after that, so I had no way of knowing.

"However..."

A sense of unease was growing inside me.

It was about those other two.

I wondered who they were. They were nowhere to be found when I finally came to.

It seemed Sachie didn't know who those people were either. They knew about Relics and were now in possession of Sachie's *relic that exchanged luck*, and Yukie's *relic that stole luck*.

I wasn't saying that there wasn't anyone that knew about Relics besides us, but they were ominous existences.

Not only that, it seemed like they also did something to cause the glass ceiling to shatter.

Who on earth were they?

"How long do you plan on daydreaming?"

Now that the rental period for the laptop had ended I no longer had anything to do at work. Saki admonished me as I was lost in thought.

I don't need to hear the Saki-like line that I should do work while I'm at work.

There's nothing I can do if there aren't any customers.

Then, as if to deny my assertion, someone opened the shop door.

"Look, it's a customer."

"Yeah, I see."

I got up to greet the customer who came in, and froze.

The person standing there was none other than Toujou Yukie.

"That's strange...I could swear it was around here."

"Are you looking for anything?" I asked her.

"Oh, I'm looking for a Relic, of course. I thought the shop I bought stuff from before was around here, but can't really remember. Do you know which one I'm talking about? Ah, this place also sells relics right? Do you have some? If so, could you sell one to me? Something like—"

I was at a loss for words. Did she learn nothing from that horrible experience she went through? Or was she just completely clueless.

"—a Relic that will make me lucky."

I knew it. She didn't learn anything at all from her experience.

Luck alone would never lead anyone to happiness.

Chapter 2 - Hope

There is another side to every story.

In everything, there is a lie.

There are secrets hidden in every story.

All will be forgotten with time.

That's why things simply cannot be judged by how they seem.

Look past the surface, see through the lies, bring the secrets to light, compensate for forgetfulness and then, for the first time, you will hit upon the truth.

But that doesn't always mean discovering the truth is the right thing to do.

It doesn't mean that the truth you struggled so hard to reach will make you happy.

Yet still people pursue it.

To put it plainly, they search for it to satisfy their curiosity or to find their own peace...

...without knowing that the truth may well be the trigger for their misfortune.



“Waaaant—”

The Malice groaned.

“Waaaant—”

Still I refused. I would not hand it over.

“Waaaant—”

The Malice, now a Calamity, howled.

“Waaaant—”

Once more, I refused. I would not hand it over.

Heresy was to be despised, fools were to be mocked, and traitors were to be scorned.

I knew full well the importance of my duty.

The sacredness of tradition had been instilled into me.

I was taught to hate.

But couldn't do it

That's why I could only repeat my answer.

That I would not hand it over.

"Waaaant—"

The Calamity was chasing after me.

It was going to follow me anywhere I went.

In order to take it away from me.

The Malice, now a Calamity, continued to pour out of the jar.



I went to my part time job at the Tsukumodo Antique Shop right after school like I always did. I opened the front door thinking about what I could do to waste time at work today.

"Ahh—you're finally here."

The shop owner, Towako-san, had an expectant smile on her face as she raised her hand to greet me.

I've got a bad feeling about this.

She had been out until yesterday searching for relics to buy. The fact that she was smiling was ominous foreshadowing about what was going to happen next.

"Ya know, I got my hands on something really nice this time."

"Uh-huh..." My shoulders slumped as things started to play out exactly as I thought they would.

"Hey, what's up with that lukewarm reaction?"

"It's exactly what it looks like..."

Towako-san pouted in disappointment at my response, but I didn't bother fixing my behavior.

You might think anyone would be happy to see the relics she discovered, but most of them actually ended up being fake. She did find real ones every once in a while, but that usually meant that extremely annoying things were soon to follow.

“You should be more like Saki-chan.”

I looked at Saki when Towako-san said that. Despite her lack of expression, she also seemed to have an unhappy atmosphere about her—not that Towako-san noticed any of it.

I followed Saki’s example and tried to show her how unhappy I was.

“Alright, take a seat.” Yep, she really wasn’t getting the message.

My eyes met with Saki’s. The two of us sighed and sat down in front of Towako-san.

“This time, I managed to get my hands on *this*.” She set a jar on the table with a thunk. It looked obviously suspicious and was made out of what seemed to be dark clay. It was large enough for Towako-san to wrap both of her arms around it, but didn’t really look that heavy. The lid on top of the jar was sealed shut with a tightly wrapped cord. It probably wouldn’t sell at all even if some religious group tried to market it as an item that could bring you happiness.

“This is called the *Calamity Jar*. I’ve been told that it seals all of the world’s malice and should never, ever be opened.”

Woah, it didn’t just look suspicious, it sounded pretty sketchy too!

“What are you going to do with something like that?”

My thoughts exactly. Good going, Saki!

“Is it something we can sell in the store?”

No, Saki. You should worry about yourself before asking about the store. You always seem to have bad luck with Relics for some reason.

“But seriously, what are we going to do with it?”

“I’m gonna research it, of course. It’s a jar with malice sealed in it. I wanna know what the heck’s *really* sealed in it and why was it sealed in the first place...doesn’t it just fire up your investigative spirit?”

“That’s just plain curiosity.”

“You really need to pick up more interests.”

“I’m extremely interested in living a quiet and peaceful life.”

What was the point of sticking your face headlong into danger anyway?

“Anyway, be careful when handling it, OK.”

“I know, it’s just research.” Towako patted the heap of documents that she apparently got along with the jar.

“Don’t do anything dumb like opening the lid.”

“Of course.”

“We won’t.”

I also warned Saki next to me. She responded with a shake of her head as if her getting warned was entirely unexpected.

She didn’t get it at all. If you asked me, Saki was plenty dangerous on her own.



Onee-sama, it’s almost over.

I put my hand on my beloved sister’s large belly. She sat quietly in her chair, gently brushing her hand on her stomach.

Ten days and nine months ago.

The child inside her that had expanded her stomach like a balloon was now fighting to come outside with all its might. Today was the day it would finally come out into the world.

The atmosphere in the room was still solemn despite the hectic activity around us. Still, I couldn’t help looking forward to the baby being born. I couldn’t stop myself from smiling.

“Hurry, come out.” I called to the child in singsong voice.

Only one more day until it was born.

But I couldn’t wait, even just a little bit faster would be nice. I had called to the child in my sisters’ stomach many times before, praying that everything would go well.

“It’s not going to come out any faster even if you sing to it like that, you know.”

Onee-sama smiled painfully and rubbed my head in the same way that I was rubbing her belly.

That’s when the surrounding people began scolding me for refusing to let go of her.

“Alright, we need to start getting ready now. Why don’t you go back to your room?”

I pouted in reluctance seeing them politely trying to get rid of me. I was going to stay next to Onee-sama's side no matter what.

"Please, listen to what they say."

If Onee-sama was the one asking me, then there was nothing else I could do. I got up to leave the room.

She suddenly grimaced in pain as she was seeing me off. Seeing her tense up her body so forcefully, I knew.

The pain. It was coming.

I had seen Onee-sama suffer from nausea, fainting spells, screaming because of the pain in her belly many times before today. I even saw her groaning in pain just yesterday.

The people in the room took her to an inner room and kicked me out as soon as they saw what was happening. But rather than go back to my room, I waited near the closed door. I could still hear her screams of pain from the other side.

Ten months and nine days ago.

That the child that took shelter in her belly would be born safely, I prayed in front of the door.

Over...

...and over

...and over.

The ten months and ten days that the child had lived inside my sister's stomach ended in an instant.

An excited cry came from inside the room. Unable to hold down my excitement any longer, I forced open the door to push my way through the crowd.

Onee-sama seemed worn out, but she still looked proud that she had completed her duty. Auntie, Onee-sama's mother, picked up the newborn child and headed deeper into the room.

On the far end of the room stood an altar with a large jar enshrined at the top. The jar, normally sealed and tied shut with a string, was now open.

Oba-sama climbed to the top of the altar and lifted the child up high.

Seeing that, those in the room began to pray reverently. Onee-sama joined them in their prayer. I wasn't really sure what to pray for, but followed suit and prayed as well.

Oba-sama silently nodded.

Then.

The healthy newborn baby was...

...hurled into the *Mystic Jar*.

—thank goodness. I felt so, so relieved.

That hateful, malice filled lump that had hurt my beloved Onee-sama was finally gone. The lump of malice that she gave birth to was thrown into the bottom of the *Mystic Jar*.

The world was full of malice.

But deliverance from this malice did not come from the gods.

That duty fell to we who served the shrine—the priestesses. We take the evil spreading in the world into ourselves and contain it. Then, for ten months and ten days, we go through hellish pain to incubate the malice in our bodies, followed by even more hellish suffering when the time comes to give birth.

This is the special power we priestesses have received from the gods.

After they're born, the children of malice are thrown into and sealed in the *Mystic Jar*, a sacred treasure we received from the gods. It's impossible to see what's inside the jar no matter how long one looks. There is only a deep, deep darkness. That darkness is the malice of the world—the malice gathered and sealed by successive generations of priestesses.

As long as we priestesses continue to seal the malice, the world will remain at peace. We earn our privilege from people's gratitude to the shrine.

Purifying the malice is something that can only be done only once in a lifetime.

That's why priestesses who go through a purification once are promised to live out the rest of their lives in peace. Onee-sama, who went through the purification a few days ago, earned our gratitude and is now able to live the rest of her life peacefully.

"Onee-sama, are you feeling better now?"

"I am."

Her complexion looked a lot better now than when she gave birth to the lump of malice a few days ago.

The fact that she still couldn't walk around on her own yet and had to stay in bed every day was unfortunate, but soon she should be able to play with me like she used to.

Onee-sama had been fully devoted to that child and became unable to play with me while she was harboring that child of malice. I felt disappointed and a little bit angry at first...but also respect that she was carrying out her duty splendidly. It was a complicated feeling.

But all of that was over now. Onee-sama had given birth and purified the malice. She could now live her life freely and peacefully.

"Hey, Onee-sama. Was it difficult?"

"It was."

"Did it hurt?"

"Yes, a whole lot."

"Are you happy?"

"....."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I feel very proud."

Onee-sama had hesitated for just a moment. She had an expression I had never seen before on her face. She also didn't tell me she was happy. Why was that? How come she wasn't happy even after fulfilling her duty?

Then, Onee-sama rubbed my head.

"Because we can't obtain the happiness of normal women."

"A normal woman's happiness...?"

"It's okay if you...no, it's alright even if we don't know."

I wasn't able to understand what Onee-sama meant by that.

But before long, I would have the opportunity to understand the feelings of priestesses who fulfilled their duty.

Because three days later, the lump of malice—the child of darkness—started to grow inside me.



I went to Tsukumodo right after school the next day like I always did, and noticed something unusual right when I opened the door to go inside.

Saki wasn't at the register.

Maybe Towako-san had called her and she was on the second floor. I guess it didn't matter either way. There was nothing to steal here and it's not like any customers would be coming anyway. I kept my unflattering thoughts about the store to myself, and went to get changed.

Saki was still gone when I returned to the store. Just changing my clothes should have taken at least five minutes though...maybe she was just really busy.

"Saakii—" I tried calling her from the bottom of the stairs, but there was no response.

Oh well. She'd probably come down soon anyway...might as well watch the shop while I waited.

I waited ten minutes, twenty minutes. Saki still didn't show up.

Deciding that there was no point in waiting for customers that would never come, I tried calling her from the bottom of the stairs one more time.

There was no response.

I was a little concerned about the shop, but went upstairs towards Towako-san's room anyway.

There was no response when I knocked on the door.

"I'm coming in." I announced myself just in case and opened the door. But contrary to my expectations, the two of them weren't in Towako-san's room either.

Maybe they went somewhere.

I took out my phone as I was closing the door...

Hm?

I got the feeling I was being watched for a moment...but there was no one in the room.

The call connected, so I turned my attention back to the phone.

"The number you dialed is currently out of range..."

Saki didn't answer and all I got was a message telling me that her phone was either dead or wasn't getting a signal.

I searched the first floor, the second floor, and even the underground warehouse, but the two were still nowhere to be found.

I couldn't find them anywhere and there was no way to contact them. Seeing as there was nothing else I could do for the moment, I resigned myself to waiting in the store.

I waited ten minutes, thirty minutes...no one returned. It was so quiet in the empty store that I could even hear the clock ticking. Feeling unusually thirsty, I went to the kitchen to get a glass of water.

That's when I noticed that preparations had already been made for tea. There were two cups prepared—one for Saki and one for Towako-san, I supposed. I stole one of the cups to satiate my thirst.

?

The black tea was completely cold, as if it had been brewed several hours ago. It wasn't just the cups though. Even the teapot was cold to the touch.

Meaning the two of them had already been gone for at least a few hours.

Did they really just leave things like this before they left? Did they just forget about the tea they brewed?

My doubts gave way to unease.

“Saki! Towako-san!” I shouted...but there was no response.

I checked the warehouse, the first floor, and the shop again. Still gone.

The last place I decided to check was Towako-san's room. I opened her door one more time.

The room was the same as it always was, with documents scattered all over the place. There was barely any space to set foot...I couldn't remember a time when this place was actually organized.

Although it wasn't a rare sight to find Towako-san buried under a mountain of documents, I couldn't see the two of them laying buried under anything this time.

But I still stepped into her room just to make extra sure. Towako-san always said not to go into her room without permission...she'd definitely be mad if she found out.

—!

My silly worries suddenly vanished. Or rather, they were completely overridden.

I suddenly became aware of an intense weight surrounding me. It wasn't a physical weight, but I definitely felt something the instant I walked into the room. It was an otherworldly sort of pressure...almost like the very air had turned to lead. My body was now stiff because of the tension, but I still continued into the room.

The room was, of course, as messy as it always was. Various documents and Relic-like tools had completely taken over the space.

Speaking of which, the *Calamity Jar* was in here too. It was still on the desk, just as I had left it when I carried it in here yesterday.

Suddenly, a painful noise rang inside my head—

I opened the door and stepped into Towako-san's room. There were mountains of papers piled senselessly all over the place.

There was barely any space to walk in the room

That strange mirror that didn't show a reflection was still here...

If I had to say there was anything off, it was that the owner, Towako-san was missing.

The jar on the desk was still there too. Its lid had been taken off and—

——!

I stared at the jar on the desk when I came back to my senses. But it was still tightly sealed.

Getting the feeling that it was better not to, I stopped myself from touching it with my outstretched hand.

That's when I noticed the pieces of paper on top of the desk. I took a closer look and saw that they were actually document scraps.

I was supposed to be waiting for customers that would never come with my usual excess of free time right now.

However—

I noticed far too late that the everyday life I was dreaming about had already started to form cracks.

A single line written on the document scraps told me of the true disaster that had occurred.

Calamity will befall all those who learn the truth of this jar.



It hurts.

It hurts.

It hurts so much.

The constant nausea that assailed me every day had driven my heart to its breaking point. I no longer had anything left to vomit, but the nausea continued to come in waves.

Surely this was because my body was rejecting the lump of malice inside of me. Or maybe it was because the malice had become like a poison and was eating away at me.

If only I could get rid of it now...

But I couldn't do that. The lump of malice was still growing. I had to continue taking in the malice of the world so it could mature.

If I didn't collect the malice of the world inside me and raise it for ten months and ten days before sealing it in the jar, then it could never be purified. This pain was proof that the lump of malice inside of me was growing well. It wouldn't be right of me to complain.

If even Onee-sama was able to endure this pain, then I would also try to endure this, and splendidly carry out my duty to purify the malice.

I hardened my resolved once again.

"Are you alright?"

Onee-sama held a fruit out to me as I lay on the bed.

"Can't you try eating a little?"

I really didn't want to eat, but I also couldn't cause Onee-sama to worry. I took a bite. Regular food was impossible, but maybe I could somehow manage with fruit.

"Urrgggh." Another wave of nausea hit me before I could finish that thought. It was almost like the lump of malice inside me was trying to starve me to death.

Onee-sama patted my back.

"I knew it. It's impossible."

The determination I had earlier disappeared, and a complaint escaped my lips.

"Onee-sama, please don't hate me if I fail my duty."

"It'll become a little easier once you overcome this part"

Meaning that the nausea would go away once I got used to the change. But after that poor health and agony were still waiting for me. That really didn't make me feel any better.

"I'll teach you something good. It's a secret technique I used to get past this painful period."

After making me promise not to tell anyone, Onee-sama leaned forward to whisper in my ear.

“Hatred. Despise both the malice inside of you and the malice of the world.”

The shrine had taught me about love, but this was my first time learning about hatred. I felt a little excited, like I was hearing something I wasn’t supposed to. It was secret technique that suited a mischievous girl like me who always got in trouble for not following the rules.

Onee-sama really was amazing.

“I understand.”

“Good. I know how kind and pure you are. Try to hate the child of malice inside you as much as you can and make that hatred real.

“—so that you won’t feel sorrow when the time finally comes.”

I'm scared.

I'm scared.

I'm so scared.

The pain and nausea gradually went away, but in exchange, my stomach began to swell strangely. It was now large enough to be visible even under the loose fitting priestess clothing. It was already plenty big as it was—just how long would it continue to grow? I had the uneasy feeling that my stomach would split if it continued to expand like this.

Days and months passed, and although I became used to the strain on my body, the strain on my heart only increased.

I became unable to forgive even the slightest mistakes from my helpers, and I even lashed out at my beloved Onee-sama. Despite that, I felt extremely lonely when alone.

Surely the malice I was holding in my belly was exerting its negative influence on me.

I couldn’t wait to get it out of me.

Once that happened, I could go back to how I used to be.

But there was still quite a long time before that day would come.

How long could I endure this anxiety and dread?

I knew that there would be even more agony from now on. Would I still be able to endure it?

The malice raged inside me as if to sneer at the weakness in my heart.

I felt like it was trying to tear its way through me and burst out.

Please...stay still.

I'll let you out when the time comes.

I put my hand on my violently spasming belly and tried pacify the lump of malice inside of me.

No, this wasn't right. I shouldn't try to pacify it.

I was supposed to hate it. Just like Onee-sama said, I had to despise the lump of malice inside of me.

Hatred. *Hatred*. If I could do that, then maybe I could be as strong as she was.

Help me.

Help me.

Somebody please help me.

I desperately ran in my dream.

The mass of malice launched an attack against me.

Like pitch black darkness incarnate, it tried to seize me.

“Stay away!”

I desperately ran

...and ran.

...and ran.

...and ran.

Forgetting that I was told to avoid intense physical activity, I continued to frantically flee.

The mass of malice eventually disappeared.

I stopped running.

The moment I tried to catch my breath, my stomach quickly began to expand.

Don don don don it grew bigger and bigger and bigger.

Trying to hold it down was useless, I could not stop it.

My ever expanding stomach finally exploded, releasing the malice out into the world. I had failed my duty.

I opened my eyes.

My breath was ragged and I was drenched in sweat. I knew it was just a dream, but my body was still shaking in terror.

I had starting having more terrifying nightmares lately.

Nightmares of my stomach being torn apart, and the malice unleashed into the world.

And without fail, every time I opened my eyes the next morning—

Thump

The lump of malice kicked me from the inside as if it were making fun of me.

Still, I had to keep my heart strong.

I couldn't afford to fail here.

But I can't help being weak-willed. I can't stop myself from feeling anxious.

I ended up complaining.

But after that, I felt better.

I was no longer the same girl that could only cry to Onee-sama. I had become stronger, I felt.

Just as the lump of malice inside me matured, so did I.

The agony

The agony

Please, just end it already.

Cold sweat appeared at the pain that felt like my stomach was being drawn tight. I could bear it by clenching my teeth, but in moments of weakness, a groan would leak out.

The malice inside of me was trying to tear through my stomach.

It was raging. The malice inside of my stomach was raging. It felt like the inside of my stomach was being mashed to pulp.

Calm down. You'll come out soon.

But the child of malice did not know what would happen after that.

It couldn't know that it would be sealed in the Mystic Jar soon after it was born.

Maybe that's why it was trying to escape while there was still no one around. If that was what was happening, all the more reason not to let it out.

I had to complete my duty properly.

Until that day arrived, I would collect the malice of the world inside of me, and purify it.

Because I was a priestess.

It was my duty as a priestess of this shrine.

For the sake of the world, I could bear this pain.



Calamity will befall all those who learn the truth of this jar.—

The words on the document scraps told the entire story.

This was likely a message...one that Towako-san had left for me. I felt stupid for anxiously waiting for the two of them to return when something had already happened to them.

The Calamity Jar that was never meant to be opened.

Maybe Towako-san did indeed end up opening it.

But I couldn't imagine Towako-san, who knew the dangers of Relics more than anyone else, opening the lid out of interest or curiosity. No matter how sloppy she normally was, Towako-san would never do something like that. I had faith that she would have kept the Relic closed under normal circumstances.

Perhaps she had some reason to open it, or maybe there were extenuating circumstances that left her with no other choice.

I couldn't understand why Towako-san would have done something like that.

But it wasn't like I could open the lid myself. I would only fall into ruin with them.

My current mission was first to find out what the Calamity was, and second to find a way to rescue Towako-san and Saki *without* opening the jar. All I could rely on for now were the documents that Towako-san had prepared.

Since Towako-san herself didn't know much about the jar to begin with, the answer had to be somewhere in these papers. Analyzing them for myself was the best place to start for now.

I looked over the papers that Towako-san was studying before she disappeared.

The documents themselves were old. There were tears here and there, holes in the papers, and some black soot-like stains covering some parts, but there were several things I was able to clearly make out.

First.

The jar was once consecrated as a secret treasure in a shrine somewhere. The shrine apparently used the jar to seal all the malice of the world.

Second.

The women who served the shrine, priestesses, were the ones who bore this duty. They were the only ones who had the ability to seal the world's malice through the power of prayer.

Third.

The *Calamity Jar* was originally known as the *Mystic Jar*, and even back then, it was never supposed to be unsealed. That is to say, the lid was never to be opened. If the jar was opened any time other than when the malice was being sealed, disaster would befall the world.

It was the sort of things that adherents to shrines who served gods everywhere said. Prophecy, oracles, rain ceremonies...no matter the age, there were always special powers tied to religions and faiths.

I didn't know what period this *Calamity Jar* was from, but it was an era where the shrine, or in other words a time when religion and faith were strong. This jar had the role of sealing malice, so it must have been the symbol of the shrine's power in the land.

That being said, what did the *malice* sealed inside the jar refer to exactly?

Was it for example something that would point to treasure and fortune, and was said to have triggered a disastrous war in the past? I remembered seeing something like that in an old story once.

Or maybe there was a plague sealed in the jar and opening the jar would release it. Having the pathogen spread through the air to infect everyone could certainly be called a calamity.

Or what if they believed it caused natural disasters like earthquakes and lightning strikes? Even if it didn't actually seal the disasters, just seeing jar open when the disasters occurred could have given rise to the belief that the jar itself had brought disaster.

And finally, what if nothing was actually sealed in it at all and it was just an ornament? Maybe that rumor was spread as a precaution because they didn't want anyone opening the jar even though there wasn't actually anything in it. Perhaps it was even used as a threat. Practically speaking, there's no way all the malice of the world could be sealed in a jar anyway.

...it would be nice if that's how it really was.

Regardless, the present situation was that Towako-san and Saki were now missing as a result of opening the jar.

This was, before anything else, related to a relic. Normal ways of thinking would not apply. There was no point in forcing myself to think about this optimistically.

No matter what I guessed, I couldn't link it to the reason that Towako-san and Saki were missing. If the jar had some sort of curse or spell on it, and whenever the lid was opened it would cause people to disappear, that could be called a disaster. But that was too vague, I couldn't continue from there.

Then what if...no, wait. There was no point in firing out guesses at random.

I took a deep breath to calm myself down.

Rushing to find an answer without organizing the information in my head would lead nowhere. Time to take this back to square one.

What should I really be focusing on?

What was the malice that was really sealed inside this Calamity Jar?

What is the Calamity that will be unleashed if the jar is opened?

If I could find out what was sealed in it, then I might be able to predict what would happen if it were released. Conversely, if I could find out what the calamity was, then I could figure out what was sealed in the jar.

If I could figure out both, then that would help me figure out how to save Towako-san and Saki.

What I had to focus on were the words that Towako-san left behind...*Calamity will befall all those who learn the truth of this jar.*—

“Hm?”

There was something odd about this. I felt like I was overlooking something.

I read Towako-san's note one more time.

The hint she had left behind was really easy to understand.

If I figured out the truth behind the jar, then disaster would follow. By that, she meant that I wasn't supposed to open it and check what was inside. Basically, she was telling me not to open the jar...right?

So then what was I getting hung up on?

.....

Of course. It was obvious now that I thought about it.

Towako-san already knew that the *Calamity Jar* was never supposed to be opened yesterday. I remembered warning them about it yesterday, so I knew this for sure.

Despite that, why did she leave these words—or more accurately, why did she leave these documents behind?

Was it because that was all she could do in the spur of the moment?

Or perhaps—

Maybe she was asking me not to investigate the calamity that befell them. Was she trying to keep me out of danger?

No, that couldn't be it...

Towako-san knew me better than that. I wouldn't stop even if she told me that.

Shiver

A sudden chill shocked me out of my thoughts. My entire body was covered in goose bumps.

If there were countless tiny bugs crawling around me, then maybe this is what it would feel like.

However, the truth was that there were no insects. If I had to say, they were gazes.

It was the feeling that someone was watching me. Like someone was secretly observing me from the shadows, watching my every move with bated breath.

I turned just my eyes towards the place where I felt the gaze. Nothing in particular fell into my line of sight. When I tried to turn my neck in order to get a better look, my entire body stiffened up, as if it were refusing to go any further.

There really is something there.

My body was covered in sweat. It flowed from my upper back down my spine.

My heart was throbbing uncomfortably.

I swallowed, and the sound rang in my head.

I could hear the metronome sound of the ticking clock outside.

I could see something now.

The instant it entered the corner of my vision, I was assailed by a terrible sense of dread.

But I could not afford to look away.

An invisible terror was far worse than one I could face.

The unease of continuing not to look at it was won over by the desire to look and confirm if there really was anything there.

Even if I ended up regretting it.

I held down my fear, fought against the paralysis and turned towards the *Calamity Jar*.

“————!”

The jar was sitting on the table, as if nothing at all had happened.



I decided to take a walk around the garden that day since the weather was nice.

Staying in my room all the time made me feel depressed, so although I was limited to the shrine grounds, I liked to go outside every once in a while.

However, I didn't take anyone with me today. I had become accustomed to my large stomach now, so walking wasn't a problem.

I spent a lot of time in the inner part of the shrine now that I was raising the malice inside me. In the past I also used to hang out in the common area with the regular priests and priestesses.

I hadn't been there in a while though.

There was a large space around the well where I saw many people chatting with smiles on their faces. Children were laughing and playing with each other.

Even if they were called priests and priestesses, their daily lives weren't all that different from ordinary people's.

When they noticed that I had arrived, the chatting stopped and they lowered their heads towards me in respect. This was because priestesses who carried the malice were treated with the same reverence as those higher up in the shrine.

Being treated this way was a bit lonely, but given the importance of my duty, it was understandable.

“What's the occasion today?”

An older priestess asked me as she lent me a hand descending the stairs.

“I was just looking for a change of pace is all.”

She stole a glance at my large stomach for just a moment, but without saying anything, guided me to the bench near the well.

Then, a child carrying a bucket with a desperate look in her eye came sprinting towards us.

“Aren't you going to greet her?”

“I don’t have time for that right now!” The girl shot back and ran away after filling her bucket with water.

“My deepest apologies. I’ll make sure to scold her later.”

“It’s alright, I don’t mind. What’s going on?”

“Her younger sister is being born.”

“Sister?”

Ah, I see. That girl was a big sister now. I know that she would become a wonderful older sister just like Onee-sama was to me. If she was already working so hard to carry water for her new sister, then everything would be okay.

“Can you take me there?”

“Do you mean to see the newborn?”

“Yes. I would like to at least pray for her.”

“I think everyone would be overjoyed by that too.” The priestess showed me the way to the house.

There were already lots of people gathered when I arrived. A young woman was lying on the bed in the center with an agonized expression on her face.

I was at a loss for words when I saw her. For some reason, her belly looked so swollen, like it was about to burst.

Indeed. It was just like how Onee-sama was last year—and how I was right now.

“Why does she...the duty...?”

“That’s not it.” The priestess who brought me answered the question I asked myself.

“She’s not carrying malice inside of her. She’s carrying a baby.”

“?”

“That’s how new life is made.”

And—

“Waaah—!” A cry rang out in the room.

The next moment, the room was filled with excited shouts.

The woman on the bed was covered in sweat and her cheeks looked haggard, but she was smiling. She looked even more satisfied than Onee-sama did when she had completed her duty.

"It would be rude to compare it to your duty, but for women, giving birth to a child is an important duty that wouldn't lose out even to the responsibility you bear."

There was a small baby in the arms of an old woman next to the younger lady.

Not a child of malice, but an actual human child.

The grandmother passed the human child back to the young woman. The woman's face was overjoyed.

She looked much, much happier than Onee-sama did when she had completed her duty.

Then, the priestess who brought me here explained something to the grandmother, and then beckoned over to me.

"Please pray so that she will not be led astray by the malice." The young woman held the baby out to me.

The priestess beside me lifted my arms up and fixed them in place. I went with the flow, and cradled the newborn.

.....

Something was happening

I couldn't understand it.

The moment I took the frightfully fragile child into my arms...my heart shook.

It wasn't because I was sad. It wasn't because I was happy either.

But the tears would not stop flowing from my eyes.

—

"What happened?"

I returned to my room later and told Onee-sama what happened.

She had a remorseful expression when she heard what I'd experienced, and only responded, "I see, you know now."

I had seen this expression before.

It was the same expression Onee-sama had made a few days after completing her duty, when I asked if she was happy.

So that's what this expression had meant that day.

"Onee-sama, did you already know?"

"Yes. I thought it was better for you not to know, I was hoping you would be happier completing your duty without finding out. But now, I should give you a proper explanation."

I listened to what Onee-sama had to say.

To bear the child of their lover, nourish it, and then give birth...that was the single happiness of a woman that Onee-sama and I had lost.

The happiness that Auntie and my late mother had obtained.

"But you must not misunderstand. What you have inside of you is a lump of malice. They look similar, but they are very different. It's nothing like the child that woman had."

She was right. I couldn't misunderstand.

What I had inside of my belly was a child of malice. A child of malice that was meant to be sealed inside the mystic jar.

I couldn't obtain the happiness that came from giving birth.

But I could at least obtain the happiness of completing my duty.

As a priestess, that was enough happiness for me.



I wiped away my cold sweat and turned back to the documents.

I was now back where I started. Or more accurately, I now had a more fundamental problem; I now knew that I hadn't understood the true meaning Towako-san's message.

First, I needed to know what she was investigating and what exactly she wanted me know.

The documents contained records relating to the priestesses of a certain shrine. While there apparently were also male priests at this shrine, sealing the malice was a duty that belonged solely to the priestesses.

It was mentioned before that the priestess had some special power—likely through a relic—and were the only ones with the ability to seal the malice.

Looking at a more detailed section, I saw that they first gathered the malice into their bodies through prayer, and then gave birth to it before sealing it into the jar. There were even instances of priestesses who were unable to bear the burden and lost their lives in the process.

They truly believed they could save the world through their own suffering.

Certainly it wasn't strange to see sacrifice when it came to matters of faith; there were many religions that believed in special powers and the like. This one wasn't an exception either, it seemed.

That being said, there were also records of the malice being released in the past after it was sealed. The seal on the *Calamity Jar* was broken a total of two times, but the world was saved from danger due to the power of the priestesses' prayer.

There was one priestess who had forsaken her duty of sealing the malice. Despite it not being time for the malice to be sealed, she apparently gave in to her curiosity and opened the lid, unleashing the Calamity onto the world. So there were people who tried to break the seal out of curiosity, even among the priestesses...

...well, it's not like it's impossible for holy people to sin. Desire was the same for all people after all. There were naturally going to be people who violated taboos no matter the era.

But what happened to the priestess after that? There was nothing further written about it here, but I doubted she got away with it scot-free. She was likely charged with some sort of punishment.

It was often said that curiosity kills.

"Hmm..."

If even priestesses could fall victim to their curiosity...what was to say that Towako-san wouldn't either. What if, while she was researching the documents, she became curious about what was sealed in the jar and...

"...No, that can't be right."

Even if some nameless priestess gave in to her curiosity, Towako-san wouldn't have. I had to believe in her. The reason Towako-san opened the jar wasn't because of something like curiosity.

Right, there was one more thing I needed to think about.

Why did Towako-san open the *Calamity Jar* if she already knew it was never supposed to be opened? Why did she open the lid if she knew it could cause a calamity?

"!"

No wait, I was getting ahead of myself.

I considered the meaning of the message she left me one more time. It was kind of strange that she'd leave a note with such an obvious message. What if that message had another meaning... what if she wasn't telling me to stay away from the jar, but to open it instead?

Did she leave the note in rejection of what I said yesterday?

I looked at the *Calamity Jar* once again. Was Towako-san really telling me to open it?

I reached out my hand to the *Calamity Jar* sitting on the desk. Would I be able to save the two of them if I opened it?

...no, wait. I was being hasty. I pulled my hand back.

This *Calamity Jar* was never to be opened. If it was, then disaster sure to follow. Towako-san wouldn't have left such a vague message if she wanted me to do that.

“?”

My thoughts got stuck on something once again. Why did it feel like I was missing something? What was it that was bothering me?

....Of course.

They were different.

The two sentences were different.

Yesterday, Towako-san said that it was “a *Calamity Jar* that should never be opened,” and that a disaster would occur if it was.

In the message she left, she wrote, “Disaster will befall anyone who discovers the truth of the jar.”

The difference was the word truth.

Did Towako-san want to transmit that *truth* to me?

shiver—

Once again, I felt chills on my back and trembled.

The chills were stronger than they were last time. It was an unpleasant feeling, like countless bugs were crawling all over me.

There was no mistake. I was being watched. But I couldn't identify who or what had me in its sight.

...I was getting closer.

The force of the gaze from this unknown *something* gave me the feeling that I was getting closer to the heart of this mystery.



And so, ten months and nine days passed.

My experiences over the past year had matured me. I was ready to face today with a serene heart. Of course, I still felt uneasy. However, I was no longer the same person I was ten months ago.

Why do I have to go through this difficult time, why do I have to endure this pain, why do I have to feel this anxious? There were times when I thought it all so unreasonable.

There were times when I asked, *why me?*

But now that I had come to this point, I understood that there was no need to have such thoughts.

All the pain, suffering, and dread had been a test from the gods to see if I could splendidly fulfil my duty. If I couldn't overcome things like this, then I could not have completed my duty.

But I was able to endure it. I was able to come this far.

"We're finally here." Onee-sama gently took my hand. "Do your best."

"I'll try to complete my duty without fail."

...And so, my final battle began.

—

Pain that felt like my body was being torn apart.

Agony like my insides were getting ripped out.

Anxiety like a giant whirlpool inside me.

But if I could endure this, everything would be over. I would have completed my mission as a priestess.

I could purify the malice running rampant in the world, even if just a little. I could make the people of the world even a little bit happier.

That's why I couldn't fail.

I grit my teeth, howled like a beast, screamed myself hoarse as if I was going mad. The pain was so much more than what I had expected. I slipped in and out of consciousness.

The lump of malice had yet to come out.

It was like the malice inside of me was fighting against being born and being thrown into the jar. The pain that struggle brought with it was difficult to bear.

I was stronger now.

I had thought that numerous times in these past ten months and ten days. But that conviction was now shattered.

I didn't have any confidence that I could overcome this pain.

My consciousness faded away. The words of encouragement from the people around me became distant.

Someone. Anyone. Tell my weak self to try her best.

But why did I have to try my best?

For the sake of my duty?

For the people of the world?

Why did the priestesses of previous generations try so hard?

How did they find the strength to endure this pain?

Was it because of their dedication to completing their duty?

Was it the guarantee of a peaceful life after everything was over?

I couldn't overcome this agony with those things.

Onee-sama's words came back to me. I remembered how she told me to loath the malice.

True, I was able to endure until this point because of hate.

I despised this malice inside my stomach, and often thought about how I would seal it in the jar no matter what it took.

This malice that tormented the world, tormented previous priestesses, tormented Onee-sama, and tormented me...I could overcome this through hate.

But hatred alone wasn't enough.

What did I have to do to overcome this pain completely?

My dream where the malice was released into the world after it consumed me came to my mind.

I couldn't fight it anymore.

"Uggh..."

Just when my consciousness was about to be lost to the malice, I remembered the priestess who had given birth to that small baby. Seeing her face distorted in pain...surely she'd endured the same pain I was experiencing now.

What did she do to overcome the agony? What did she, who did not bear this burden of duty, use for encouragement?

I remembered the joyous expression on her face after she had her child.

That was not hate.

She wasn't smiling because of hatred.

The reason for her smile was...

"Waaah—"

I heard a voice.

It wasn't in my head, it was real.

That voice brought my consciousness back. I opened my eyes.

Looking up, I saw Onee-sama cradling something in her arms.

A small body that could fit in both hands. A small head that could fit in the palm of a hand. Fingers and toes that looked like specks. It was hard to believe such a small child could cry so loudly.

So small and helpless, yet so strong. A child full of contradiction.

This was different from a lump of malice. It was a real human child.

"....."

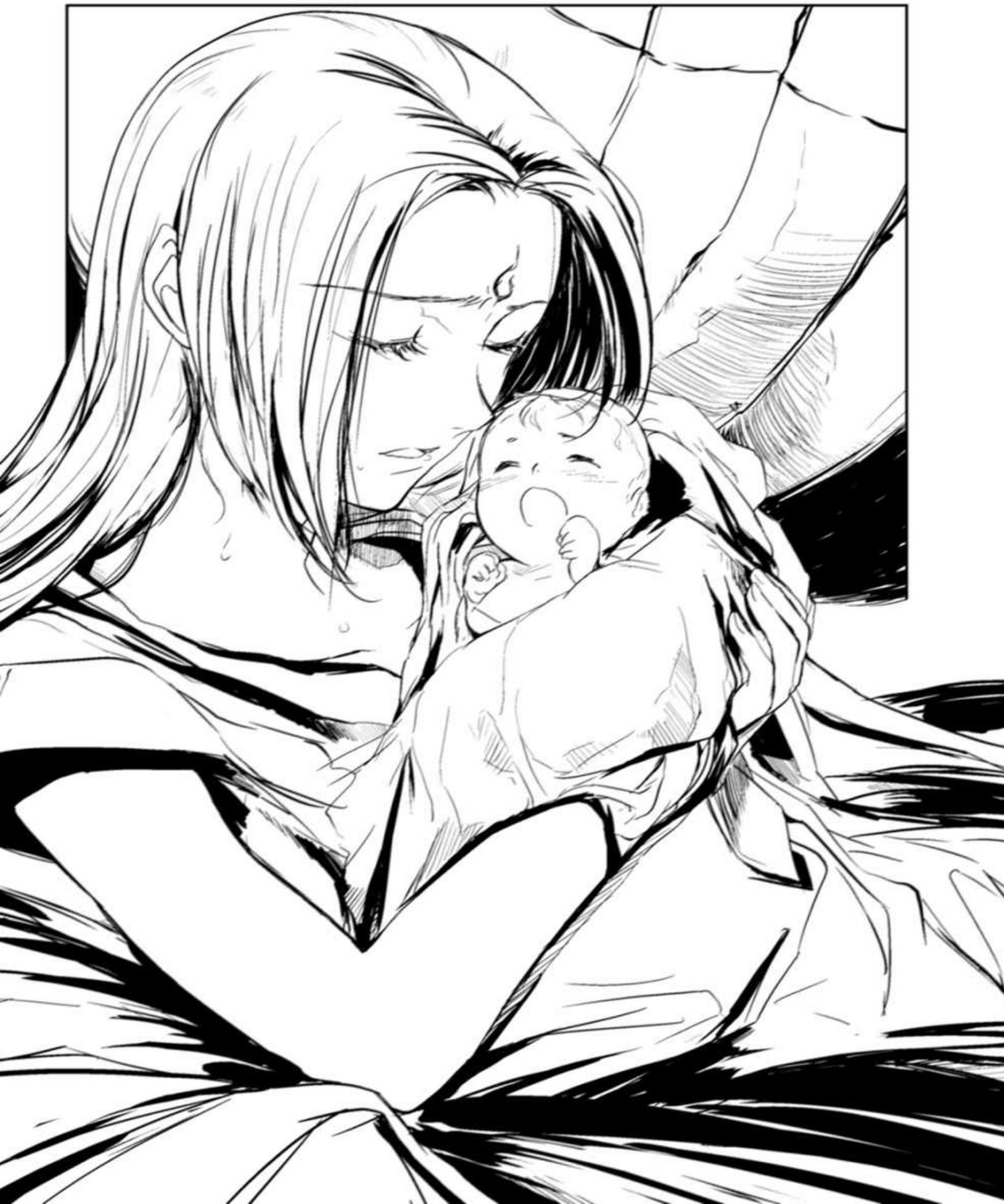
Onee-sama gave me a silent look and let me hold the baby.

I took him into my arms.

The moment I took the small, frighteningly fragile newborn in my arms...

Tears started to fall from my eyes.

My heart shook.



So this was what that young lady felt when she held her newborn child.

But this time I was overflowing with much, much more joy.

“I told you so much to hate it too...” Onee-sama’s tone did not seem critical, but she didn’t seem happy either.

A feeling that I was not supposed to have began to bud.

No, it wasn’t budding; it had already sprouted. My feelings had blossomed.

Even though I had hated it up until this point.

Even though I was supposed to hate it from now on.

Even though I knew I had to seal it inside the jar.

This lump of the world’s malice was—

—*precious*.

“You still ended up falling in love...” Onee-sama whispered as she looked at me.

Her voice was filled with pity.

Her eyes were filled with pathos.

Her back was filled with regret.

Her face was filled with envy.

Then, a scream echoed from the inner room.

The lid to the *Mystic Jar* had opened.

None of the priestesses had opened it. The jar had burst open on its own, and something was pouring out from inside.

A hideous, malicious darkness. Black as the night, thick as mud, it began to invade the inner room. It was the concentration of the malice sealed inside the jar—it was the Calamity.

“She failed her duty! The child of darkness was not born! The calamity is being released upon the world!”

The surrounding priestesses shook with dread, and began to flee as they screamed.

It wasn’t like the simple commotion from poking a beehive, it was the very picture of pandemonium. Screams and howls sounded all over the room as everyone scrambled to get to the door first. People pushing others down, trampling on them, abandoning them, to save themselves.

It was horribly unsightly. They looked nothing like priestesses who were purifying malice—priestesses who were supposed to be saving the world.

Everyone around me was gone before I could even react. Even Onee-sama who was supposed to have been at my side was nowhere in sight.

The feeling that I had been abandoned began to well up in my heart.

“Wait...please.” Feeling an acute sense of helplessness, I also tried to go towards the door—and hit my head against the floor after falling off the bed in an unsightly heap.

I couldn’t get any strength into my legs.

My body wouldn’t move like I wanted it to.

The strength which I should have had, that I had always taken for granted, had disappeared.

I was collapsed on the floor, but everyone kept running to leave me behind.

I tried to call out to them to wait, but the words wouldn’t leave my throat. I did not have enough strength in me for even that.

Why? Why couldn’t I gather my strength? It was almost like all my energy had been sucked out of me.

I looked at the child in my arms.

I finally remembered the baby in my arms.

—*unsightly*

While I was trying to save myself, I had forgotten about the newborn.

I had forgotten about the child that was so dear to me.

I had no right to call any of the other priestesses unsightly.

The despair that I felt for myself extinguished my will to move.

A feeling of resignation, that nothing I did could save me from the Calamity enveloping the room, began to bud inside me.

I was still collapsed on the floor.

I was starting to lose the will to live.

I was even starting to let go of the child in my arms.

However.

Grip

There was a slight tug on the front of my priestess robes.

I looked down and saw a small hand holding onto me.

It wasn't strong enough to be called a *hold*. It was much weaker than that. He would probably let go if I shook it even a little.

But the child held on to my clothes, because it had nothing else to hang on to.

What strength he had.

There was something driving that hand. The hand that was weak enough to be shaken off with just the tiniest bit of effort.

It was not trust.

Calling it dependence would be pitiful.

I did not know what I could compare it to.

But I could not turn my back on the will that was contained in those hands.

If I were not here, this child could not do anything.

If I gave up, this child could not obtain anything.

Strength started to rise up in me from those thoughts alone.

It wasn't enough strength to stand up.

It certainly wasn't enough strength to run away.

But it was enough to move my body, which had been paralyzed earlier, forward just a little.

It was awkward, unshapely, and unsightly.

But I dragged myself forward.

I mustered all the strength I could and crawled across the floor.

I struggled and forced myself onward.

My legs were getting scraped.

But I kicked the ground with those legs and continued forward.

My elbows split.

But I stabbed those elbows down and continued forward.

The blood flowing from my forehead got into my eyes.

But without wiping it away, I continued forward.

I could not separate from the child in my arms.

Absolutely not.

Forward.

Towards the door.

If I could go to the door then I could save him.

I could save this child.

Even if only this child.

I finally reached the door through my desperate struggle.

—I made it in time.

I managed to escape before the Calamity took over the room.

Then, a single priestess ran past me to the door.

This was it.

I heard a voice.

The door began to close.

Wait, wait!

There's still someone here!

Right here. In my arms!

“Even if just this child—!” I mustered the last of my strength and shouted.

This was the true limit of my strength.

There was nothing left now.

The voice I spent my last breath on—just barely reached them before the door closed.

—they heard me.

I raised my head and looked at the priestess behind the door.

They had waited for me.

Until the end.

"It's all your fault."

In order to let out those spiteful words.

They slammed the door shut.

And the Calamity consumed me.



The Calamity was once released due to an untrustworthy priestess.

Meaning that the Calamity attacked the world for a brief period, but thanks to the prayers of many of the other priestesses, the world was saved.

The second time, the jar was opened by an outsider. That time as well, the priestesses saved the world through prayer.

The shrine didn't try to hide that the calamity had been released. In fact, they flaunted the fact that they had saved the world. That's why it ended up being recorded in these documents.

Ultimately it looked like there weren't any records of techniques I could use to save Towako-san and Saki. However, it was still too early to say that there wasn't anything.

Towako-san left me a message asking me to find out the truth.

But the nature of that *truth* was still unknown.

If it was written in these documents, then it wouldn't be a mystery.

It was a mystery *because* it was hidden.

In other words, I had to find the truth using only the materials I was given.

First, I needed to know what was sealed inside the jar.

It wasn't a line of thinking I really wanted to consider, but I had an idea of what it was based on what I had read so far.

The priestesses collected the malice inside of their bodies through the power of prayer, and sealed it inside the jar.

But the malice of the world wasn't just some intangible thing they gathered into themselves. It would be one thing if all they did was pray, but in order to give birth to the malice, it had to have some sort of *form*.

The priestess of the shrine expended all of their effort in order to “give birth” to this something. But what was it exactly that they gave birth to?

What was the true form of the malice here?

—I was certain.

It was the answer to why only female priestesses who served the shrine were able to complete this duty.

There was only one thing they could have given birth to.

This group believed that they could save the world by putting up their own children for sacrifice.

What was sealed wasn’t the malice, *it was their own sacrificed children.*

Rustle

All the hair on my body stood on end.

I was getting closer. I had the truth in my grasp.

But it wasn’t enough.

A calamity was supposed to befall anyone who discovered the truth. Nothing had happened to me yet.

Meaning there had to be at least one more *truth* that I had yet to discover.

The truth that Towako-san had discovered, the real *secret* of this jar.

Now that I know what was sealed inside the jar, I turned my attention to the aforementioned priestess.

Obviously what I needed to focus on was the true nature of the malice and the true nature of the calamity. And in doing so, find a way to save Towako-san and Saki. What tied together the malice and the calamity was the priestess who had committed the act of betrayal.

That priestess’s betrayal was related to the calamity.

And that’s why I needed to find out the truth about it.

A chill more powerful than any of the previous ones passed through me.

But I didn’t stop thinking. I couldn’t stop thinking.

What betrayal did the priestess really commit?

Why did she do it?

I couldn't believe that she opened the jar out of curiosity simply because that was what was written in the documents.

It wasn't that everything written in the documents was a lie.

But the part containing the *truth* was not written.

The truth was being covered up.

The true nature of the malice.

The true nature of the calamity too.

Therefore the truth of the crime she committed likely also had to be covered up.

So what kind of crime did she commit?

If it wasn't because of curiosity, why did she do it?

I already knew the answer.

It was a very simple reason, more pure than anything else.

She was trying to protect her own child—

She refused to sacrifice the child she had to the Calamity Jar.

That was the crime she committed.

In other words—

"The truth hidden inside this jar, is a story about a mother who wanted to protect her child."

The moment I came to that conclusion, the seal on the jar broke. The malice sealed inside the jar became a Calamity and began to rush at me.

The lid on the Calamity Jar had opened by itself. No, that wasn't it. It was forced open from the inside.

The calamity consumed me as I was still stupefied.

I realized something as my consciousness faded away in the all-consuming darkness. Discovering the truth had nothing to do with opening the lid, the malice undid the seal on its own.

Towako-san hadn't opened the lid after all. She was attacked by the calamity when she discovered the truth, just like what was happening to me.

I had to apologize for doubting her.

That was my final thought before my consciousness cut off.



The Calamity pouring out of the jar enveloped me—

—and I learned the truth.

Our ancestors were so poor that they were even unable to find enough food to eat every day.

Therefore they decided to limit the size of their tribe.

In order to ensure that the family would continue to exist. To ensure that the family would not grow any larger.

To limit the number of people—

If the number of people in the tribe exceeded the limit, some were thrown away into the Relic known as the Calamity Jar.

The jar had a mysterious power, and unlike the limit on the number of people in the tribe, there was no limit to the number of people that could be thrown into the jar for the sake of the tribe's survival.

That Calamity Jar eventually caught the attention of the priests of the shrine. Seeing the special power of the jar, the priests must have misunderstood. They christened it the Mystic Jar and claimed that it was a holy gift from the gods.

Everything was the result of our lie.

The lie that by sacrificing our own family members, we were sealing the malice of the world. The priests believed it. They were deceived by our lie.

They decided to allow us into the shrine.

Without knowing of our accursed actions.

Without knowing the horrid secrets hidden in the jar.

And so our tribe entered into the shrine, and as a benefit, we were given enough food to live.

We no longer had to sacrifice anyone to survive—is what we thought.

However, that was not the case.

Our sin would not allow for it.

In order to protect the lie, we had no choice but to continue with our accursed actions.

We had to continue sealing the malice inside the jar.

Before we knew it, the lie had become the truth.

We became a tribe who collected the malice of the world into our bodies and sealed it in the jar.

In order to ensure our prosperity, under the pretense of saving the world, our tribe became one that sacrificed its own children—

What was sealed inside the jar was a sin.

An abominable sin that we continued to hide.

The sin had continued for ages.

It accumulated endlessly.

We were never saved from this sin.

No one at all had known about it.

The sin had been completely forgotten.

It was forced into the vessel.

And over time that sin—

—became a true calamity.

But that was not the truth.

At least, the truth in the past was not the same as the truth in the present.

The truth inside the jar changed hour by hour, and a new truth had been fabricated.

Waaaaant—

A voice rang out.

I definitely heard a voice hit my ears as the Calamity pouring out of the jar enveloped me.

Like a yearning, like a grudge, a prayer, a scream.

Waaaaant—

What did it want?

I called out to the voice.

The Calamity had taken form and there was now a dark mist before my eyes. The voice was aimed at me.

No, was it really me?

Or was it the child? The child that was supposed to be sacrificed—to be thrown into the jar. Did the malice inside the jar want this child for itself?

Was it saying that because it knew that I would not let go of him?

Did it force its way out of the jar to steal him from me?

If that were the case—

Even if it tried to—

I would not hand him over.

I gave my answer and tightly hugged the child.

The darkness began to pulse and swell.

I felt a burning heat.

Was this the Calamity's fury?

The heat was the manifestation of its rage.

Waaaaant—

I would not let go of this child.

The more I tried to protect him, the more the Calamity showed its fury through the heat.

Still, I was not afraid.

Even if the Calamity wanted this child, I could not let him go.

Even if this heat would burn me to ash, I absolutely would not let go.

Waaaant—

The Calamity's heat intensified even more.

It was certainly hot. But it was not hot enough to thoroughly burn me.

I touched it and understood.

From the heat, I sensed something that was childish, undignified, and clumsy. But that was also why it was so precious and warm.

It wasn't a heat that I could feel with my hands.

It was a heat that I, who lived a blessed life, had never felt.

It was the heat of jealousy.

The Calamity was not angry at me.

It was jealous of this child.

The Calamity from the jar wanted this child.

It burst out of the jar to forcibly take him away.

To take away the child that should have shared the same fate as them.

They could not forgive that only this child was special.

But all the more so.

I would not let him go.

I turned to the Calamity once more and proclaimed.

That this child was different.

That this was *my* child.

He was not a child of malice.

He was different from you, the Calamity, who had been born as lumps of malice and thrown into the jar—

I tightened my arms around the child in order to protect him from the Calamity.

The darkness became even deeper.

The heat became even hotter.

My actions only further fueled the envy of the children that had been thrown away.

The only thing that would satisfy them would be for me throw this child away.

But that was the one thing I could not do. It was impossible.

Suddenly, someone stood in front of me.

“Onee-sama...?”

Onee-sama, who should have gone, was here.

Even though I assumed that she had fled to the door, Onee-sama had always been by my side.

She gently held her hand out to me, and her eyes fell to what was in my arms.

“Show me please.”

At her request, I loosened my arms, and the child’s form was revealed.

“So it is a real child.”

It was different from what Onee-sama had given birth to last year. It had been dark colored, almost entirely like a bundle of ash.

It didn’t have the warmth this child did. It didn’t have the life this child did.

“If it is nurtured with love, a warm living child will be born. But the children of our tribe were nurtured with malice, and born as bloodless children of darkness.”

Even if she loved it, Onee-sama thought, a child wasn’t what would be born. That was why she decided to hate it. To lessen her sadness even a little bit.

“My child was also supposed to be born like this...”

But now Onee-sama knew.

That a child would be born if it was given love, even if it first sprouted from malice.

“Where is my child?” At Onee-sama’s question, the malice changed their target.

The heat became one of rage and hatred, it grew more powerful and attacked Onee-sama.

“Onee-sama!”

She was blown back by the Calamity and thrown mercilessly to the floor.

The Calamity—the children who’d been abandoned—would never forgive their mothers.

Waaaant.....

The Calamity turned its focus back to me.

It looked at me and groaned again.

Ahhh, that was it. It made sense now.

This entire time I was thinking that my child was different. That it was different from them.

But that was wrong.

I realized it. And then I understood.

That this child was the same as them.

And they were the same as this child.

The only difference was whether or not they were loved.

That's when I understood.

I understood the Calamity's words.

What these children were saying.

With simple purity.

Their desire.

The jealousy that drove them mad.

What they wanted.

How they strongly wished for something they never had.

They wanted love—

The Calamity was the materialization of the lies and malice hidden inside the jar. And it was the deep-seated grudge of the children who'd been thrown away.

They had been waiting for the children who were thrown away just like them.

So that they would not be the only ones misfortunate.

So that every child born would be unhappy.

However, in the end they learned.

That there were children who were born and loved and weren't thrown away.

That there were children who were different from them.

That's why they came out.

That's why they came out of the jar.

To be loved—

Because of someone, who caused them to act on the desires they carried in their hearts that they didn't think could be fulfilled.

That person was me.

I ended up teaching them about love.

I taught them about the love they could never have.

And that's why they were jealous.

What the Calamity—no, what these children wanted was not this child.

What these children wanted was a mother.

A mother who would not throw away her children. A mother who would love them.

The person they wanted was me.



So this was what it felt like to be sinking in a muddy, bottomless swamp.

I sank deeper and deeper.

I looked right, left, up, and down. Everything was cloaked in pitch black darkness.

I couldn't see anything. But I was sinking.

As if a bottom did not exist, I continued to sink.

... Did I die?

Maybe I had lost my life after discovering the truth of the jar, and being consumed by the malice.

I was going to die sooner or later anyway...

Then, what came to my mind was the form of the Tsukumodo Antique Shop.

That scene I had become so accustomed to. In that deserted shop, where Saki was. Where Towako-san was.

That was my wish. My sole wish in this muddy darkness.

Right. I couldn't have died. I hadn't saved Saki and Towako-san yet.

...save? Right, of course. The moment I reached the truth, a muddy darkness had burst out of the jar and consumed me.

What happened to me after that?

I had a lingering memory of having been pulled somewhere.

What if...this was the inside of the jar?

Bit by bit, my hazy memories became clearer.

After I was swallowed by the Calamity, I was dragged into the jar.

There was no doubt. I was inside the jar.

Saki and Towako-san must have experienced the same thing I did when they discovered the truth. Meaning they had to be here as well.

But where?

I tried to say something, but couldn't.

Saki! Towako-san! Rather than shouting, I called for them in my mind. I remembered my wish.

Then, my feet landed on something.

I had finally reached the bottom.

At that moment, a silhouette came into view.

For a moment, I couldn't recognize who it was, but it was really only for a moment.

Like a sudden revelation, I realized who it was.

But because of my realization, I started to feel doubt.

Why was she here—?



“Onee-sama!”

I called to Onee-sama, who was collapsed on the floor. Fortunately, she wasn't gravely injured and soon opened her eyes.

I knew it. She was the one person I could trust with anything.

The Calamity, burning with envy, continued to tear through the room. It was only a matter of time before it broke through the door and rushed into the world outside.

It could not be released into the world. Even more so when I, a priestess, was the cause. I absolutely could not allow it to pass.

“Don’t tell me you...” Onee-sama had a frightened expression on her face; it seemed she’d guessed what I was about to do.

I nodded in affirmation.

There was no one else.

The one that the children who had become Calamity had chosen was no one else but me.

The newborn child, who had been quiet up until this point, started to become unsettled.

Perhaps he also realized what was happening. He was a child with good instincts. I was sure he would grow up to be smart.

That I would not see him grow up was painful. So painful that it cut me...but I had to make this choice.

But don’t misunderstand.

It’s not that I’m abandoning you.

It’s not that I did not choose you.

I chose this way so that you could live a happy life.

The only thing that I can leave for you,

Is a future.

“Precious child. Beloved child of mine.” I gently rubbed his head and he started to cry.

Then he laughed.

What kindness.

It was like he was sending me off with a smile.

I slipped a keepsake into the hand of the child holding my sleeve. “Have this, in my place.”

Then, I entrusted the child in my arms to Onee-sama.

Onee-sama gently accepted him, as if she were receiving a precious treasure.

“He might live a bitter life as a child born of malice, but please protect this child.”

“I will, for your part too.”

I turned my back on my child and called to the abandoned children.

“Why don’t I become your mother?”

The Calamity overrunning the room changed their movement and turned back to the inner room.

They followed me as I walked to the jar, one step after another.

I was going.

I left my own child in order to take these children who had become Calamity with me.

Into the *Mystic Jar*.

The world was full of malice.

The world was full of sorrow.

The world was full of rage.

However,

I, who had given birth to a child borne from the malice, knew.

That the world was full of joy.

That the world was full of good fortune.

And more than anything.

That the world was overflowing with love.

“What will you call him...?”

At Onee-sama’s question, I said a single name.

“His name is *Pithos*.”

It was a name full of the hope that the child would never lose to the world’s malice.

“Farewell.”

Onee-sama called my name one final time, and announced our parting.

“*Pandora*.”



“Please forget the truth that you learned.”

The priestess whose love of her child had surpassed her duty as a priestess. In order to protect the world, she had taken the Calamity with her, and sealed it and herself into the jar.

The priestess was still in the jar even now.

From her story, I was able to hear the entirety of the events surrounding the jar. But at the end of her story, she asked me to forget everything I heard.

“That’s how it is.”

When I turned to the voice, I saw Towako-san and Saki.

The two of them experienced the same thing I did after all. But before I could be happy about being reunited with them, hearing the priestess’s intentions took priority.

She explained before I could ask why she wanted us to forget.

She indicated the muddy darkness around us. “These children are afraid of the truth. More than anything, the truth is proof that I am not their true mother.”

They were the children that the previous generations of priestesses had abandoned—children that had turned into a Calamity.

“They are afraid that anyone who knows the truth will come and snatch me away from them in an attempt to save me. That’s why they pull anyone who knows the truth into this jar.”

The jar contained their wish for a mother.

It would probably be insensitive to say that they were being selfish, considering how they had grown up.

“There is only one way to save yourself. That is to forget the truth. If you swear to forget, then these children will only consume your memories, and you will be free.”

“But if I leave, my memories of you...”

“Will be forgotten, yes.”

“But what about you...”

“I will be fine. I was the one who chose to be with these children.”

“But...”

“If I choose to leave the jar, then these children will follow me. If that happens, the world really will be attacked by the Calamity. That’s why you all should be the only ones to leave.”

I reflexively looked at Towako-san.

“We can either leave her behind and go back to our world, or retain our memories out of sympathy and stay here. Neither option is perfect.”

“Then why don’t you choose?”

I didn’t know if Towako-san was saying she would follow my decision, or if she was telling me to decide for myself.

I looked at Saki, but she wasn’t able to offer help either. She was struggling to find an answer in her own way.



The priestess was like a human sacrifice. She was a captive.

I felt sympathy for the children that had been abandoned. But that didn't mean she should remain imprisoned here.

But if I got her out of this jar, then the Calamity would follow.

The calamity would be released upon the world.

That couldn't be allowed to happen either.

I couldn't sacrifice the world in order to save her.

I couldn't save her.

But the fact that she could save us by staying behind made me feel guilty.

She said it was alright for her to be forgotten and remain here.

But was it really? Was it really OK?

Was I really fine with it, and more importantly,

"Are you really fine with this?" I asked her.

"What about you?" The question was turned back to me.

"Would you really be fine with spending a long time here with me just out of sympathy?"

That...was not acceptable.

If I didn't throw away the truth....and her, I wouldn't be able to save Saki, Towako-san, or even myself.

It was a balance. But it was obvious that both sides were heavy.

"You wouldn't know anything, it would be as if nothing had happened. The guilty feelings in your chest would disappear as well. A world where you don't know the truth would certainly happier."

Then, a lump of darkness fell and settled into her hand. She nodded several times as if she was holding a conversation.

The depth of affection on her face was just like a mother's. Suddenly, the lump of darkness disappeared.

"Just now..."

"That child has set out on a journey. It was asking for permission."

She turned her affectionate face to me.

“Thank you very much, outsider.” She read my expression and thanked me.

“But please forget about me. This is where I want to be. I plan to stay as these children’s mother until they are all saved.”

She had actually been purifying the malice. The children sealed into the jar as malice, the children who had become Calamity. She was saving them.

“I hope these children will one day forgive the world.”

“I knew you would say that...but I also feel the same way.” I heard Towako-san’s voice in my ears.

Towako-san was not blaming me. She was just saying what she thought. The pain in my heart was because I was weak.

But my decision would not change.

“I will forget the truth.”

In an instant, the darkness engulfed me.

It consumed the truth inside of me.

To forever remain in the dark—

Chapter 3 – Words

People are beings with deep desires.

That's why they can't settle for one choice.

That's why they always desire more.

That's why they want to have everything.

But what if people were forced to make but a single choice?

What would they choose?

Lovers?

Friends?

Parents?

Children?

Money?

Status?

Prestige?

Or would they choose—

Themselves?



She was kind.

She had a sweet scent.

And she was warm.

I could entrust everything to the thin, shaky arms that enveloped me.

Why I held this belief with such conviction, I did not know.

But without a shred of doubt, she was someone I could rely on unconditionally.

She was everything to me back then.

In the truest sense, she was the world to me.

That's why I could entrust everything to her.

Someone I had never seen.

Someone I had never met.

Someone whose whereabouts I still did not know

Someone I could call Mother.

I opened my eyes.

Dismal, filthy, and more than anything else, cold.

It was my own, never changing room.

There was nothing here—except the smell of garbage and an atmosphere of desolation.

No, there was one more thing.

I quietly opened my clenched fist.

In it was a single leaf. It pulsated and shined the colors of the rainbow as if it were made of crystal.

Kotonoha, a leaf that transmitted memories.

It was what showed me that dream.

Of a mother who no longer existed, even in the farthest corner of my memories.

But what Kotonoha showed me could not be described as just a dream. It was special.

There was warmth.

There was smell.



There was weight.

It felt *real*.

I did not have a mother next to me now.

But that leaf is what taught me.

About the warmth a mother could have.

That's why I believed.

That I had not been thrown away—



I found myself in a place I had never seen before.

Obviously, it wasn't Towako-san's room, and it certainly wasn't Tsukumodo Antique Shop either.

The buildings in front of me were falling apart and there didn't seem to be any signs of people living in them. There were no pedestrians passing through the garbage-lined roads between the buildings either. It was even more deserted than the secluded road where Tsukumodo was—entirely like a slum right out of a movie.

I remembered what the priestess told me.

About the truth of the *Calamity Jar* that was erased. About how I should have been able to return to my world by throwing my knowledge of that truth away. But for some reason, things hadn't gone the way they were supposed to. The fact that I still had memories of the *Calamity Jar* was the best proof of that.

Perhaps I was still inside the jar.

Or perhaps some other power was at work and I was in a different place altogether.

Or maybe this was all just a dream.

Either way, the biggest problem right now was how to return back home.

But despite the torrent of questions running through my head, I remained calm. I wasn't restless or agitated.

Because Saki was right here next to me.

She was standing there without the slightest bit of impatience or panic on her usual, expressionless face. That wasn't to say she was calm. Rather, it was more that I rarely ever saw her flustered. So I couldn't be the only one panicking in this situation; I couldn't lose that small pride as a man.

"Do you think this is a dream?" Saki asked.

I didn't have an answer for her of course. All I knew was that I had never seen this place before and that Saki and I were the only ones here. There wasn't anyone who could tell us where we were either—Towako-san included. Perhaps she was the only one who returned safely.

I felt something on my cheek and brought myself back to reality.

Saki was lightly touching my cheek.

"...is this a dream?"

"Who knows? What happens when you try pinching your cheek?" I said in a joking tone and—

"Good idea."

Saki went ahead and pinched mine instead.

"What are you doing!?"

I couldn't talk properly because she was pulling my cheek, but now I had even more questions.

"I was pinching just like you said. How was it? Did it hurt?"

"It hurt."

"I see...this must not be a dream then." Saki quietly let go of me.

"What could it be then? I felt pain so this couldn't be a dream but..."

I followed Saki's example and tried pinching her cheek this time.

"Doesn't look like it hurts. Maybe this is your dream then?"

"It does hurt though." Saki complained without a single change in expression.

That lackluster, expressionless reaction definitely belonged to Saki. This seemed real enough.

But it's not like pinching each other was a reliable way to tell if this was a dream in the first place. Even if it was, there was no point if we couldn't wake up. Now that we were done joking with each other...

Saki's hand touched mine as I let go of her cheek, interrupting my thoughts. She then held it, increasing the strength bit by bit until it turned into a strong grip.

“Hey, Saki that hurts.”

“.....”

I complained, but Saki didn’t loosen her grip.

“I’m sorry OK. I shouldn’t have pinched your cheek.”

I could imagine her rebuking me, saying that I should have known better than to pinch a girl’s cheeks.

That’s how our usual exchanges went, anyway.

But she increased the strength in her grip even further until her nails were digging into my skin.

“Saki?”

“Does it really hurt? Saki finally asked a painfully obvious question.

“Of course it hurts.”

“It’s not just your imagination?”

“Does it look like I’m imagining it?”

“This really isn’t a dream?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“It’s not your dream, and it’s not mine either?”

“That’s what I’ve been saying this whole time.”

I couldn’t take this pain any longer. Just as I was about to shake off her hand—

“If this isn’t a dream, then why are you here?”

Those were simple words.

Words that she said with her usual expressionless face.

However.

For the briefest moment, it looked like Saki was about to cry.



“How long are you going to be asleep, Kairi?”

Hito called my name from outside the room.

“It’s time for work.”

It really wasn’t something grand enough to be called “work.” We just looked for things we could eat or exchange for money in this trash heap slum of a town. It was all this nameless, ragtag group I belonged to could do to secure a place for ourselves.

This slum had been my home for as long as I could remember. Hito originally found me wandering alone one day, and brought me here, but I didn’t remember that at all.

From that day, he’d been my older brother, my parent. In fact, he was also the one who named me. He gave me the name Kairi.

I didn’t know how I had survived up until that point. Some said that an old man on death’s door raised me in his remaining time, while others said that I was mostly raised by some child loving creep. There were even claims that I was raised on the streets, scrounging for scraps like a worthless stray dog.

Of course, I didn’t know the truth myself.

It wasn’t like any of that mattered to begin with.

I couldn’t afford to worry about that sort of thing here.

Showing any openings would get me robbed. Showing any weakness would get me beaten, or if I happened to be unlucky, killed.

There was no law and order. Women and children were treated the same.

This slum was where those abandoned came together.

Abandoned by the world, by their towns, by their parents. This slum was where those people fell.

I didn’t understand why I found myself here even though I wasn’t abandoned. I had been robbed, beaten, and almost killed...but still I continued to live on.

There was a single reason for this...I was waiting for my mother to come for me someday.

She wasn’t with me right now.

And I didn’t know when she would return.

That’s why I patiently waited.

“Hey, can you even hear me?”

The irritating sound of the half-broken door grated into my ears as Hito opened the door to our shared room.

I panicked and shoved *Kotonoha* into my pocket. Catching sight of that, Hito looked at me with an exasperated expression.

“You were looking at it again?”

“Y-yeah.”

“How many times have I told you not to take it without permission?” He held out his hand and I reluctantly handed over the leaf.

Right. This didn’t belong to me. It belonged to Hito.

“I’ve told you a million times already. The dream you see in *Kotonoha* isn’t yours. It’s mine.”

I knew that.

I had seen the mother holding her child countless times in my dreams. That child was not me. That woman was not my mother.

The child in her arms was Hito. The person holding him was his mother.

I only wished it was me instead.

But that was alright.

I could feel just a little bit happier whenever I had that dream.

And I felt like I could believe...

That I also had a mother somewhere; one who had held me just like that.



Regardless, we weren’t going to make any progress just standing there.

First, we needed to investigate and find out where we were. Judging by the atmosphere, it didn’t seem like this place was completely safe. Or at the very least, there didn’t seem to be much public order.

“Why don’t we start by looking for people?”

“That’s a good idea. I wonder if anyone’s even around though.” Saki agreed without changing her expression or tone.

That second where she looked like she was about to cry must have just been my imagination after all. There wasn’t any point in worrying about it.

The sun had yet to set, but thick clouds covered the slum in a dim shadow. The bleak sky above us as we walked along the unpaved road made the already gloomy atmosphere even gloomier.

Suddenly, we heard a sound.

“Do you hear that?”

“Sounded like footsteps.”

It really did sound like there were a number of people running our way. They were coming at us from around the corner.

I hid myself and peeked around the corner. The footsteps belonged to two children that were running towards us. The boy in front looked like a middle schooler, and the one running after him was a little younger. Well, I didn’t think there were any schools around here, so maybe that wasn’t the best way to put it.

I stepped out from my hiding place and called out to them.

“Do you guys have a second?”

But they didn’t seem to hear me and continued to run with no sign of stopping.

“Umm...do you have a moment?” I stood in front of their path and asked again. However, they continued to charge forward as if I weren’t there at all.

“Ugh.” I tried to move out of the way, but it was already too late.

Just as I thought they were going to crash into me, something unexpected happened.

“Huh?”

The two children had phased right through me.



The day ended without me finding anything to eat or sell.

My punishment was to go without food. It was all because I lagged too much behind Hito.

I normally only got one meal a day, so losing out on that bit of food meant I was going to have to go hungry today.

My stomach let out a sharp groan.

“I’m so hungry...”

I didn't feel like doing anything and rolled around the room, bored. It was probably better not to waste my energy though; I was going to have to sleep like this.

But before I went to sleep, I wanted to see that dream one more time.

However Hito returned to our room the moment I took *Kotonoha* out from his belongings.

"You're looking at that *again*?" He let out an exasperated sigh.

"I'm sorry."

"Well, I guess it's fine for today."

"Huh?"

"You were bullied again weren't you?"

Everyone laughed at me cause I couldn't find anything. It didn't bother me though since it was true.

But one of the guys went too far and said, "That's why your parents threw you away."

"I wasn't thrown away!" I shouted at him, but no one believed me. It was always those jerks who had parents that said no one wanted me.

While it was true that my parents weren't around, I wasn't the only one like that. Even Hito didn't have his parents with him.

But they only said these things to me.

Some kids said they heard it from the adults.

Others said they could just tell.

Even if I told them that it was nonsense, without any memories or my own *Kotonoha*, it would just be a waste of breath. I had no way to make them understand it was a lie.

Mother, where are you? Come for me quickly please.

"If you have time to be depressed, then you have time to think about what to do for food tomorrow. They'll stop bullying you if you do that."

"That won't change anything. It's not like you did great yourself today."

"Well that's too bad." replied Hito as he took some bread out of his pocket. It was muddy and stale but I couldn't take my eyes off of it, hungry as I was.

"You're drooling."

I wiped my mouth in a fluster and tried to hide my embarrassment with a complaint.

“That’s sneaky! You actually did have food!”

I bet he probably got his hands on some soup too.

“Quiet, they’ll find out.”

“Well I wish they would. They’re going to be really mad at you for this”

“Oh so that’s how it is. And here I was thinking I could split it with you.”

“Really!? OK I won’t say anything then.”

“Calculating guy, aren’t you? You should be grateful.”

The bread cracked loudly sound as Hito snapped it in two. He handed the slightly bigger half to me. I didn’t say anything and stuffed the bread into my mouth before he noticed his half was smaller.

“Eat it slowly. I don’t have anything else for you.”

“I’m already done.”

My stomach grumbled the second I finished eating. In fact, I felt even hungrier now.

“No helping it I guess.” Hito passed the other half of the bread to me.

“Are you sure?”

“Don’t worry about it. I already ate.”

“Sneaky. You were trying to eat all this by yourself?”

“That’s why I brought it here to split with you. I’ll take it back if you don’t stop complaining.”

“I was just joking, Hito. You’re not sneaky...but they will be mad if they find out.”

“You can’t say that after you’ve already eaten. It’ll be alright though since I didn’t take much. Those guys already take too much of our food without searching for anything themselves.”

“But the punishment’s three days of no food if they find out right?”

“Right, that’s why you need to keep quiet about this. You’re my accomplice now that you’ve eaten.”

Oh no.

But I couldn’t return food that I already ate.

“Also, don’t touch that with your dirty hands. Give it back.” Hito pointed to *Kotonoha* in my hands.

I didn’t want to give it back, but for the moment food was more important.

Hito’s expression turned serious and he stared steadily at *Kotonoha* as he held it in his hands.

I was sure he missed his mother too.

He didn't tell me the details so I didn't know for sure, but apparently the woman I saw in *Kotonoha*, Hito's mother, had passed away. Unlike me, he would never have the chance to see his mother again.

"Hey Kairi. Do you know about the shrine?"

"Yeah, I heard the adults talking about it before. They were saying it was the shrine's fault people were unhappy everywhere."

The shrine had the duty of protecting the world from Malice.

However, one the priestesses at the shrine gave in to her curiosity and opened the jar that sealed the Malice, unleashing disaster onto the world. Because of that, malice, poverty, loneliness, disease, and all sorts of other terrible things were unleashed on the world.

In other words, our unhappiness was all the shrine's fault.

"Yeah, but that's not what I'm talking about."

"What are you talking about then?"

"You know, the shrine also has the duty of passing on people's words."

"Uh huh." So they keep messages for people, right.

"You don't get it? I'm telling you they have more *Kotonoha* leaves."

"What?"

"It seems they use *Kotonoha* at the shrine and use that to deliver clients' words to others. They might even have a message from your parents."

"Huh?"

"Your parents. They've up and gone somewhere right? That's why I'm...no, actually, nevermind. There's no way things would work out so conveniently. Forget it."

"Tell me more! You're saying I could hear my mother's words if I go to the shrine?"

"I'm only saying there's a chance...but it's probably impossible. There's no way the shrine will listen to what people like us have to say. We don't even have a way to prove who we are."

"Oh..."

"But if you really want to hear it no matter what, then I guess the only option would be to sneak into the shrine and steal a *Kotonoha* leaf."



“What’s happening?”

The scenery around us shifted completely the moment the children passed through me. It felt like we were in the middle of a scene change in a movie or something.

We had been in a dilapidated town until just a moment ago.

But now I found myself inside of a building, completely unlike the previous location. It was a wide hall, surrounded by white walls and topped with a white ceiling.

The weak light from the candles illuminating the hall showed that that no one else was here with me.

“Saki!”

“I’m right here.”

I heard her voice behind me. I felt a little calmer now that I knew we were still together.

“What just happened?”

“I don’t know. It kind of feels like we’re in someone’s dream.”

“A dream...?”

I did enter a certain girl’s dream once before. This situation felt really similar to that.

However, the Relic that allowed that should have been stored in the basement at Tsukumodo, and I hadn’t planned on going into anyone’s dreams.

That’s when I noticed the item in my hand.

“Huh?”

I was holding a thin, heart-shaped object for some reason.

It was crystalline and shined the colors of the rainbow, kind of like the back of a CD or DVD. It looked fragile enough to break at any second, like a thin wafer of ice.

“What’s this?”

I didn’t remember having anything like this.

“Saki, do you know what this is?”

I showed it to her. She looked at it for a while, but

“...I don’t.” Saki shook her head.

When did I pick up something like this? And more importantly, what exactly was it? There were so many things I didn’t understand.

But before I could organize my thoughts, the scenery began to change again.

We were now watching a shadow sneaking towards a large and empty room. I couldn’t see clearly due to the poor lighting, but silhouette looked like it belonged a child. He looked around the area and hesitantly entered the room.

I gasped, but like before, the boy didn’t notice my presence.

This boy was the one who had almost crashed into me earlier. He was the only recurring element in this nonsensical world. Perhaps it was his dream that we were currently seeing.

The boy continued deeper into the room just like that.

In the inner part of the room was a set of stairs that led to an altar. The boy’s breath was ragged, perhaps due to nerves, but still, he began to climb the stairs to the altar.

He couldn’t see us at all. Saki and I followed after him to see what he was looking for.

We followed the boy as he climbed to the top of the altar.

“This is...”

At the top of the altar was—



I snuck out of the hideout and headed towards the shrine after hearing Hito’s story.

It was almost night by the time I reached the shrine, but that only made things more convenient.

Like Hito said, the shrine would never listen to someone like me, so I couldn’t just walk through the front gate.

I kept out of sight and slipped into the shrine grounds. Although I didn’t look it, I was pretty good at hiding and sneaking around.

There were no guards other than the ones at the entrance since they probably didn’t think anyone would sneak into the shrine. Once I snuck into the grounds, getting into the actual building was easy.

Hito said that *Kotonoha* was held in a great hall on an altar in the deepest part of the shrine. The explanation he gave me made it almost sound like he had seen it before. Hito's information gathering skills were as great as always. He never had any problems finding food either, that was his gift.

I moved cautiously to avoid getting caught after I got into the building and snuck deeper and deeper into the shrine.

I had no idea what they'd do to me if I got caught.

But I would stop at nothing if it meant getting a message that my mother left for me.

I wondered where she was.

Why couldn't she be with me?

And why did she—

"Here it is." I had passed through a long, long corridor and was finally at the deepest part of the shrine.

I checked my surroundings one more time to make sure the coast was clear before pushing the door open. A creaking sound of iron rubbing together sounded through the room. I confirmed that there was no one else in the room and quickly slipped inside, shutting the door behind me.

Candlelight flickered in the room, lightly illuminating the surrounding area.

The lighting was poor and I couldn't see the details, but there were stairs at the end of the room, and at the top there was something that looked like an altar.

I headed straight for the altar unable to hold my impatience in, unable to look away. I climbed up the stairs and faced the object at the top.

"Found it..."

Just as Hito said, there it was—

—The jar, *Kotonoha*.



—The *Calamity Jar* was enshrined at the top of the altar.

At that moment, I realized that this absurd world was actually a continuation of that priestess's story.

I had definitely chosen to throw away the truth and return home, but instead of being sent back, I found myself in front of the *Calamity Jar* once again.

“Hey, Tokiya.” Saki spoke up. “Do you think this is the past?”

“I think so...”

The layout of the building we were in certainly looked like a shrine. I wasn’t sure if the same group of priestesses was here, but that would make sense considering the direction things seemed to be headed.

Assuming that was the case, it would mean that we were looking at *Calamity Jar*’s past.

Maybe this was the jar’s way of preventing us from leaving? If that’s what it was, then how were we supposed to escape?

“What’s going to happen now?”

“We might see the Calamity released from the jar a second time.”

The seal on the Calamity Jar was broken a total of two times, but the world was saved from danger due to the power of the priestesses’ prayer—

I remembered seeing that line in the documents.

If the priestess from before opened it the first time, then I supposed this would be the second. I didn’t know who this boy was, but him opening the jar now would fit chronologically.

But even if we established that this was the past, we still hadn’t solved the riddle at all.

We still didn’t know how to get back home.

“Hey, Tokiya. If we interfere here, do you think we can change the past?”

It seemed Saki was more concerned about the situation in front of her than going home.

“What do you think?”

“We’re ultimately just looking at scenes from the past. The people here can’t see us and we can’t touch them.”

I reached out to touch the *Calamity Jar*, but my hand just slipped through it.

“There’s nothing we can do.”

“I see...”

Saki didn’t let it reach her face, but she was crestfallen.

Did she sympathize with the priestess that much?

A seed of doubt began to grow as I looked at her.

...Did Saki really choose to throw away the truth?



“Huh?”

I had no idea what happened to me.

I suddenly lost my balance and was forcefully shoved face first into the ground. The impact made me see stars inside my head. By the time I recovered from the pain and the confusion, my movement had already been restricted.

“Is the jar safe?”

“Yes, but barely.”

“We made it just in time.”

I heard several adults talking. Lifting my head, I saw the priests and priestesses of the shrine standing over me. They must have entered the room without me noticing.

“To think there would be people sneaking into the shrine. And to think it was a child of all things. What is this world coming to?”

A priestess looked down at me with a chilly gaze.

“Answer me now. Why did you sneak in here?”

My arm was twisted behind me when she saw my unwillingness to respond. Unable to bear the sharp pain running across my shoulder, I answered her.

“I came...to steal....*Kotonoha*.”

“*Kotonoha*? ”

A moment later, Even more priests rushed into the room. Perhaps sensing that something had occurred, the man clenching my arm loosened his grip.

The priests continued into the room until they reached the altar where the priestess was standing. They whispered something in her ear.

“What did you say?”

I couldn't hear what they told her, but the priestess sounded startled. She turned to look down at me again.

"Answer me. Were you the one who stole *Kotonoha*?"

"...I came to steal it, but I didn't do anything yet. I'm sorry."

Kotonoha...that large jar was still right in front of me.

"It certainly doesn't look like you have it. Where are your friends? How many people were with you?"

"I came alone."

I confessed right away this time, afraid that they would twist my arm again. In fact, going along with them would prevent other people from getting in trouble. This was something I chose to do on my own after all.

But the moment I thought that, a sharp pain rain across my shoulder again.

"Your resolve to protect your friends is impressive, but you cannot lie to us. "

"I'm...not...lying..."

I answered while thrashing my feet in pain, but the priestess did not believe me.

"Do you want to get hurt some more?"

"It's the...truth. Let me...go."

"Then where did you come from?"

I couldn't bear it anymore and told her about the slum.

"I see. That's where you came from. Perhaps we should not have overlooked that place...well that's fine either way. So you came with your friends from the slum."

"I...didn't..."

The priestess looked at the priests to see what they thought. I didn't see how they responded, but her face became pensive.

The arm behind my back slackened. I was teary faced and drenched in sweat, my breath was ragged from the pain.

"It doesn't seem like he's lying."

"What if they were using him as a decoy to take *Kotonoha*...?"

"That's certainly one possibility."

The priestess talked in a whisper with the priests before turning back to me once again.

“You said you came here to steal *Kotonoha*, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what *Kotonoha* is?”

“It’s that jar.”

“That is called the *Calamity Jar*. It is not *Kotonoha*.”

“Huh?”

I couldn’t understand what she was trying to say.

“It’s not inside the jar? But I was told there was a rainbow-colored leaf that could send any message...”

That’s what Hito told me. That the shrine had a mysterious item that could send the words I wanted to anyone. I just had to find a large jar and take out a rainbow-colored leaf like Hito’s.

“You thought that *Kotonoha* was in that jar? Absurd. There’s nothing so ridiculous inside.”

“Then what *is* inside the jar?”

“Malice. Inside the jar is the malice of the world that we priestesses sealed away. Had you opened it, the world would have been engulfed in calamity and we would have faced certain disaster.”

“I can’t believe...”

What this priestess was telling me was totally different from what Hito said. Was she trying to trick me? No, she wouldn’t have any reason to do that.

The information Hito gave me must have been wrong.

“It seems you don’t know everything. However, *Kotonoha* is, as you said, one of the shrine’s secret treasures. A leaf through which one can transmit memories to any person in any time. That’s not to say no one knows about it, but its existence certainly isn’t public knowledge.”

“So who is the one who told you about all this?”

“That’s...”

The priestess took my ignorance as being tied to *someone’s* involvement. I’d hoped that by being honest, I could avoid getting anyone else in trouble, but things weren’t going to be so easy.

The grip on my arm tightened. It didn’t hurt yet. But my body still remembered the pain. The blood drained from me and I felt numb. My body was refusing to take any more of this.

But I still couldn't tell them about Hito.

"Aaaargh!"

My arm was twisted further. The groan from my shoulders forced a scream from my mouth.

"Ahhh....hhhh...."

I grit my teeth and endured.

I couldn't tell them about Hito. They would do something terrible to him if I did. Just because he talked to me. All because I decided to sneak in here.

My arm was twisted up to its limit, but just before the bone broke, just before I lost consciousness, the hold on my arm slackened.

I felt nauseous. My tears and sweat were now flowing freely.

"Don't get the wrong idea. We won't do anything to the person who gave you this information. We just want to talk to them. We just want to know how they learned about *Kotonoha*."

The priestess stroked my head and gently asked again.

"Won't you tell me? Who told you about *Kotonoha*? What kind of person are they?"

Were they really not going to do anything to him?

Hito didn't steal anything at all. He didn't even sneak in like me. All he did was tell me about what he heard from someone else.

"*Kotonoha* was stolen, you know."

"Huh?"

"If you didn't steal it, then someone else must have, right?"

I didn't know anything about that. Someone else had already taken it by the time I snuck in?

This was the worst. It was no wonder they suspected.

But that was wrong. I didn't steal it, and neither did Hito. There's no way it could have been Hito.

Because he already had a *Kotonoha* leaf; there was no reason for him to steal another one.

"If you don't tell us, then we'll have to assume that person is the mastermind and send pursuers after them."

"Wait! ...I'll talk."

If I didn't say anything, Hito would be made out to be a criminal.

"The one who told me about *Kotonoha* was my friend, Hito."



The scene in front of us faded away to lead into the next one.

Priests and priestesses were interrogating the boy. It hurt to watch, but there was nothing we could do. Our voices wouldn't reach and we couldn't touch them.

This was after all a scene from the past.

All we could do was quietly observe.

However, the pieces of this puzzle felt like they were all starting to come together.

I looked at the rainbow-colored object in my hand. Come to think of it, it did look like a leaf.

So this was *Kotonoha*. Its power was to send the memories infused into it to whoever the user wanted, whenever they wanted. With that, I understood why we didn't return to our own world.

We had to abandon the truth in order to go back home. But when we decided to abandon the truth, *Kotonoha*'s power took effect and showed us these scenes. Since what we were seeing now was related to the *truth*, we couldn't be said to have abandoned everything.

But just whose memories were we seeing now?

Was it one of the people in front of us now? Was it multiple people? Or was it someone else altogether?

She wasn't present here, but the priestess, Pandora, was also one possibility. It was probably safe to exclude her though since she intended to return us to our old world.

That was all the information I had for now.

But there was also one more question. Why was *Kotonoha* sent to us?

It transmitted memories to whoever the user desired, but who would have known about us? We didn't have anything to do with this world. Assuming that the sender was someone from here, it was extremely unlikely that they intended to send it to us specifically.

In other words, we must have met some sort of condition. In addition, we could conclude that Saki and I met that condition, but Towako-san did not.

So now I had to figure out what the difference between us was.

Finally, I needed to know *why* we were being shown the continuation of the *Calamity Jar*'s story.

What goal did *Kotonoha*'s user have?

If all they wanted was to show us this story and have us watch it until its eventual end, then it would be best to patiently wait it out.

However, if they had some other reason. If, for example, their goal was to keep us trapped in this world, then we would need to find a way to escape.

In the end, nothing was really clear.

All we could do now was continue watching for a little longer.



“Hito...?”

I couldn't see what kind of expression the priestess was making, but she sounded startled.

She gathered herself and continued to press me with questions.

“That's his name?”

“Yes, that's right.”

“And this is a child?”

“Yes. He's just a little older than me.”

“Why would this child know so much about *Kotonoha*? ”

“I think it's because he already has his own leaf.”

I didn't hide anything about *Kotonoha*. Hito already had one and that's why he didn't have any reason to steal another. He'd be accused of being a criminal if I didn't say anything, and I didn't want to cause him any trouble.

“Do you know what message it contains? ”

“There are no words. All it shows is a mother cradling a baby in her arms.”

I knew this because I saw it with my own two eyes.

“That's it? Really? ”

“But all Hito did was tell me about *Kotonoha*. He didn't sneak in here and he didn't steal anything.”

“Enough already.” The priestess stopped questioning me and turned to give out orders to the priests.

“Find this Hito at once.”

“You said you wouldn’t do anything...!”

“He might still be in the shrine. If you don’t find him here, then go to the slums. Use as many people as you need.”

“Hito only told me about it! He didn’t steal anything!”

I protested, but she ignored me completely. The priests accepted her orders and left the room in order to search for Hito.

“That’s cowardly...you broke your promise...”

I felt empty the moment I said that. She didn’t have any reason to keep her promise.

Powerless as I was, I still I prayed for Hito’s safety. He wouldn’t be in the shrine, but that didn’t make me feel any better if they were going to chase him all the way out to the slum.

Would they blame Hito as the mastermind who stole *Kotonoha*? He would get in trouble for my stupid actions.

I felt so pathetic that my eyes started to water again.

“We found him!” The priests had returned to the room.

In one of the priest’s hands was some kind of flower pot. Inside the pot was a plant with shining, rainbow-colored leaves. That must have been *Kotonoha*.

But what was up with that? I thought it was stolen...

Before I could finish that thought, the priests brought a boy into the room.

Hito.

But they couldn’t have gotten to the slum so quickly...

“We found him hiding inside the shrine. He had *Kotonoha* with him.”

“Hito...?”

I looked up at him as I lay on the floor.

Why was Hito in the shrine?

Did he follow me here? Or was it as the priestesses said, that he snuck in here as a thief?

What would he want to steal though? Hito already had a *Kotonoha* leaf; there shouldn't have been any reason for him to come here. Was he here to steal treasure from the shrine to sell? I hadn't heard anything about that. Maybe he thought I wouldn't be helpful and didn't tell me. Or maybe...

I wanted to ask him all the questions that were surging up, but Hito didn't look back at me.

"I presume you're Hito?"

Hito did not answer the priestess.

"...An incident happened in this shrine about ten years ago." She abruptly began.

Me, Hito, and even the priests raised our eyebrows, but the priestess quietly continued.

"The *Calamity Jar* in which Malice is sealed—there was once a priestess who opened the jar out of curiosity and unleashed calamity upon the world. Thanks to the prayers of the other priestesses, the calamity was somehow sealed back into the jar. However, the priestess who opened it, perhaps feeling the weight of responsibility, or perhaps running away from her sins, disappeared.

—She left behind a single child."

She stared at Hito and continued.

"That child's name was Pithos."

I looked at Hito. He looked back at me. Just by exchanging glances, we knew what the other was thinking.

"I was like an older sister to that priestess, and thus the responsibility for raising him should have fallen to me. However, that child could not be raised in the shrine, for he would have surely been killed. That's why I let the child go. I couldn't do anything but let the child go.

I couldn't choose to run away with him.

For I chose to be a priestess over being that girl's sister."

The priestess drew closer to Hito.

"It's you, isn't it, Pithos? Why did you return? To learn the secret of your birth? Or was it revenge for being abandoned? ...Regardless, the reason doesn't matter. However, I want you to tell me one thing.

"...Why did she open the jar?

"Tell me. Was it really out of mere curiosity? Is the true reason inside the *Kotonoha* that she entrusted with you?"

However, Hito ignored the priestess's insistent questions, and instead looked at me.

For the first time since he came into the room, tears were flowing from his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Kairi.”

And he apologized to me.

There seemed to be various reason for this apology, but I understood what he really wanted to say.

“Hito...were you using me?”

“...That’s right.”

“Why?”

“...Because I wanted *Kotonoha*.”

“But why? You already have *Kotonoha*, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t.” Hito quietly shook his head.

“That’s not it, Kairi. That *Kotonoha* leaf doesn’t belong to me. It’s yours. I took it from you in the first place.”

“—Huh?”

“Do you remember the day we first met? I bet you don’t since you were still small. You were all alone, but still laughing happily. When I asked you why you weren’t lonely, you showed me *Kotonoha* and said, ‘I’m fine. I can always meet my mom with this.’

“I was jealous. Bitterly so. That’s why I did it. That’s why I took *Kotonoha* away from you and pretended it was mine. Even though it didn’t show me anything.”

“Then...”

“The person you saw wasn’t me. It was *you*.”

“...Oh.”

My heart remained unmoved even after hearing that.

“Hito, did you find your own *Kotonoha*? ”

“Nope. But I already know. I know why my mom and dad died and left me behind...they left me letter.”

Hito took out a ragged paper from his breast pocket. He must have always carried it with him.

“Why?”

“In order to let me live.” Hito smiled through his tears.

“We were poor, you see, and there was only enough food for me to eat. My parents wrote that they chose to die. They wanted me to understand. They wanted me to understand...”

—How could I understand something like that!? There’s no way I could. What was I supposed to do after that? Did they not understand I would continue to live completely alone? I didn’t even need it. I could have done without food. If they were with me, I could have endured it...

It made no sense. That’s why I believed their true thoughts were left somewhere else. I wanted to know the truth, that’s why I wanted to get my hands on *Kotonoha*.“

“Wait...” The priestess seemed to have lost her cool and final spoke up.

“Are you not Pithos?”

“Yep. Unfortunately, I’m not the Pithos you were talking about.”

Then Hito looked at me. The look in his eyes was more painful than ever before.

“I’m sorry for lying to you. I’m sorry for not saying anything until now. I’m also sorry you had to find out this way. Even though if I hadn’t done something so stupid, you would have remained in the dark about everything.”

Hito returned *Kotonoha* to me.

But I didn’t need it anymore.

Because I knew.

That I had been abandoned by my mother—

“I see, so I was thrown away...”

It wasn’t about Hito.

The child that appeared in the story about the shrine priestess wasn’t him.

That priestess unleashed calamity on the world, and ran away on her own.

She ran away from her responsibility.

She abandoned her child.

Hito’s parents, and my parents too—

“This was never real!” I raised the *Kotonoha* that Hito returned to me above my head.

The *Kotonoha* that my mother left behind for me.

The *Kotonoha* that showed me a dream of being held, overflowing with love and full of warmth.

But that was really just a dream.

It was nothing more than a lie and a false dream.

“Wait! If you destroy it, you’ll never be able to hear its words again!”

The priests’ shout stopped me.

“I don’t know what words are stored in there, but you shouldn’t destroy it.”

“Ahaha....” I laughed.

The memory were all fake. The dream a lie.

But these were the memories of my one and only mother.

Even though I knew I was abandoned, I was still led around by the nose. I was caught in her spell.

We who had been abandoned by our parents, couldn’t throw away even one of their words.

“What do you mean?” The priestess sounded confused as she asked Hito.

“My name is Hito. The kid I picked up had a name that was confusingly similar to mine, so I changed it for him.”

Hito was the one who gave me my name.

“His real name is Pithos. He’s the child that was abandoned by your calamity priestess.”

Isn’t that great. She was able to find out who Pithos was.

But for me, that truth was cruel.

I wanted to know. I always wanted to know.

But it would have been better if I didn’t.

If I couldn’t even cling to my dream, then what were we supposed to live for?

There wasn’t even a fragment of hope at the very bottom of this world.

The world was full of malice.

The world was full of sorrow.

The world was full of rage.

That’s all it was. If it was all a cruel world with nothing else...

I dashed up the altar and grabbed the lid on the Calamity Jar

“...Then it would be better of gone!!”

I unleashed Calamity on the world.

Just as my mother once did—



Who sent *Kotonoha* to us?

Why *us* of all people?

What reason did they have?

There were still unanswered questions, but I had finally figured out a way to return to our world.

Apparently if I destroyed *Kotonoha*, we'd never be able to see the memories it contained again.

Meaning all we had to do was destroy this leaf and choose to let go of the truth one more time.

I wasn't happy about leaving questions unanswered like this, but in this situation, we couldn't afford to wait until everything was neatly resolved.

I had no idea where things would go from here.

The best option right now was to take any chance to go home as soon as possible. I'd forget the entire truth once I returned anyway, so any unease I felt over leaving the mystery unsolved would probably disappear as well.

“Tokiya, are you going to destroy it?”

“Yeah, just like we heard a second ago.”

“I see...” Saki's voice was tinged with regret.

But she must have known she couldn't endanger herself out of sympathy, all the more so for events that already happened in the distant past.

Just as I was ready to crush *Kotonoha* in my fist—

—Saki touched my hand.

“Huh?”

She seemed just as confused by her own action.

She just reached out to me without thinking all of a sudden...that's what it felt like, at least.

“Saki...”

“Sorry...it's nothing.”

She pulled her hand back.

What was she trying to do?

Was she trying to stop me?

What was Saki thinking?



Countless voices surrounded me the moment the darkness burst out of the jar and consumed me.

Voices of hate.

Voices of rage.

Voices of sadness.

The feelings of children abandoned.

The same feelings I had. That's why I understood them. I understood all of their voices.

I spoke to the calamity.

I told them to cover the world with their hate, their fury, and their sadness.

Towards those who were born into fortunate lives.

Towards those who were born wanted.

And more than anything, towards those who were born loved.

But then—

As if to reject my words, the malice, turned Calamity, attacked me.

No, that's wrong. Don't attack me!

This negative energy was for those born into fortunate lives.

IT'S YOU—

Not me!

This torment is for those who were born wanted

THAT'S YOU—

No, it's not me!

Only those that were born loved should be destroyed by the Calamity.

IT'S YOU IT'S YOU IT'S YOU IT'S YOU IT'S YOU IT'S YOU IT'S YOU—

The resounding voices threatened to split my head.

The pain running through me threatened to tear me apart. Why? Why did they all envy me?

I wasn't fortunate.

I wasn't wanted.

I wasn't loved.

The calamity, now mud-like, dragged me deeper and deeper into its depths.

I couldn't muster any strength to fight it.

I really would die like this.

But that was also fine.

It's just, if I could, I wanted to take those who were born loved—those who had what we could never obtain—down with me.

With those thoughts in my heart, I continued to fall.

I fell, and I fell, down into the deepest depths of the calamity.

There, I saw it.

A faint glow. A weak, vague light, like something out of dream.

And in that light, a silhouette.

A solitary woman.

A woman cradling a child in her arms.

The child entrusted everything to the woman that held him. That's all it was.

That dream again—

The same dream as always. I was seeing it even at a time like this.

Even though I knew it was a lie.

Even though I knew it was fake.

The mother was holding her child now, but she would throw him away before long. She would abandon her child to escape her responsibility and run from her sins.

That gentleness.

That fragrance.

That warmth.

All of it was fake.

I stretched my arm out to swipe the light away.

And the moment my outstretched hand touched it—

—A change began to occur in the light.

This dream was always just a mother holding her child.

But this time, something was different.

The story of how it began, how it progressed...and how it ended flowed into my mind.

It was a single story.

One that had been hidden from me.

Of the wretched past of the clan that sealed malice.

Of the curse of the sealed malice, hidden by the shrine.

And—

Of the short life of a certain priestess.

It was the story of the brief time a child born from malice was showered with a lifetime's worth of his mother's love.

A truth completely unlike the *truth* that the world knew.

This was the story of the hidden truth, lost in the depths of the jar.



Suddenly, a painful noise rang inside my head—

I've destroyed Kotonoha and see myself beginning to fade away

It looks like abandoning the truth was a success.

I'll definitely be able to go back home now.

Saki is quietly watching me.

I turn and look back at her.

That's when I notice.

Saki looks different from me; she's not fading away at all.

She stands there, doing nothing.

I desperately reach out to touch her.

But before my hand reaches...

... my vision cuts to black.

—!

I came back to my senses and stared at Saki.

“What’s wrong?”

Saki was still there, expressionless as always. I looked at myself in a panic, but *Kotonoha* was still in my hand undamaged. I wasn’t fading away either.

What was that just now?

Vision showed me premonitions of death.

But I couldn’t understand what this one meant.

I disappeared, and only Saki remained. In other words, did that mean only the person who destroyed *Kotonoha* could abandon the truth?

Or did it mean that this vision was foretelling my death, and that I shouldn’t destroy *Kotonoha*?

I didn’t know what to think.

I couldn’t understand what Vision was trying to convey to me.

“You won’t destroy it?” Saki asked in an even voice.

“Yeah. I saw a vision.”

“I see...”

I didn’t need to explain any further. Saki understood that destroying *Kotonoha* was dangerous and didn’t ask me anything else.

Why though? Why did I disappear, but not Saki?

I thought we could go back home by destroying *Kotonoha*.

But now it seemed that wasn't the case.

Just what had I overlooked?



SHE THREW YOU AWAY—

The calamity whispered to lead me astray

SHE DIDN'T WANT YOU—

It was true that my mother threw herself into the jar and left me behind.

YOUR MOTHER THREW YOU AWAY AND CHOSE US—

It was true that my mother chose the abandoned children.

However—

What did that matter to me?

The Calamity's whispers didn't affect me at all now that I knew the truth.

In fact, their envy made my realization all the stronger.

I thought I had been abandoned.

I thought I wasn't loved.

But that was wrong.

The truth was hidden inside this jar.

The hidden truth, the one stolen from me.

But my mother left me a part of that truth.

So I wouldn't fall into doubt.

So I wouldn't lose sight of it.

She left a single leaf in my hands.

“...I was so stupid.”

The dream *Kotonoha* showed me was real.

How could I have doubted her kindness?

How could I have doubted her warmth?

How could I have doubted the depth of her love?

It was a truth beyond any words.

I tightly held *Kotonoha* as The Calamity spewing out of the jar continued to eat away at me.

I could see it now.

The image of my mother holding me, enveloped in endless love.

I saw myself with no doubts, entrusting everything to her, and believing in her.

I now felt the same way I did then.

My mother never abandoned me.

My mother...

“...loved me that much.”

I wished I had noticed sooner.

The truth that I would have never known had I not struggled and reached the bottom of this jar.

Even though it was right next to me the entire time.

I made a terrible mistake.

I opened the lid on the jar.

I unleashed calamity on the world.

I thought I was following my mother’s footsteps, but that was wrong. My mother saved us. She saved the world, and me as well.

And despite all that, I brought her thoughts, her determination, and her sacrifice all to nothing.

“I’m sorry.” She wasn’t here, but I still apologized.

My heartfelt apology would never reach her now.

If she were here, she’d probably be shocked and really abandon me this time.

Or maybe she would just gently scold me.

Please abandon the truth—

I heard a voice.

The calamity was still eating away at me and I couldn’t lift my body.

But there was definitely someone standing next to me now. The voice continued to speak from above me as I lay on my back.

"You, who have discovered the truth of this jar, please forget what you have learned. Please forget it all. Do that, and you will be able to return to your world, and I shall return the calamity back into the jar."

This voice didn't belong to one of the children of calamity.

It was the voice of a much older woman, one filled with warmth and kindness.

"Please forget."

I almost agreed to her request.

However, gathering all of my resolve, I managed to refuse.

How could I forget something like this?

If I forgot this truth, then I would be lost once again. I'd be full of resentment again.

Even though I finally knew the truth.

Even though I finally learned what I always wanted to know.

I didn't care about going back home.

I didn't care what happened to the world outside.

This truth was one I couldn't abandon. I just couldn't.

—I didn't want to let it go.

"Thank you. However, it's best that no one knows the truth."

I felt something softly stroking my face.

This hand—

Was gentle.

Was fragrant.

And was warm.

"____!"

I knew this.

I knew this gentleness.

I knew this fragrance.

I knew this warmth.

This was, this was—

—My mother's.

I tried to raise my head with my little remaining strength.

But I couldn't manage to do even that.

I didn't have that kind of strength left after being attacked by the calamity.

But I knew someone who was strong enough to do even more under the same circumstances.

I knew this because of the truth hidden in the jar.

Back then, my mother crawled across the floor to escape to the door with me in her arms when the calamity attacked her.

I had just been born, and she shouldn't have had any strength left in her.

But now I couldn't move.

I couldn't even lift my head.

How? Why was she able to do something like that?

“...Was it for my sake?”

The more I understood the depth of her love, the more I was moved by it. And the more ashamed I felt of my stupidity.

“So please, abandon the truth. Then go live in your own world.”

It was a forgiving voice.

This was bad. I couldn't abandon it, but it was hard to resist.

It was fading away. The truth I finally obtained was fading away.

I'd forget everything if I let go of the truth.

If that happened, I'd have doubts again. I'd be resentful again.

I didn't like it. I didn't want to forget. I finally got a hold of what I always wanted.

But I couldn't resist. I couldn't stop the truth from being pulled out of my head.

I gnashed my teeth in frustration.

Even though I didn't want to forget. Even though I absolutely could not forget.

Even though it would mean letting go of my mother again—

“I understand everything...Pithos.”

With those words, my resistance collapsed.

“...Mother.”

I stretched out my hand which shouldn’t have been able to move.

I still held *Kotonoha*.

The *Kotonoha* that Hito once stole, that had never contained any words.

I knew what I had to do with my mother’s words.

I had another option open to me beyond struggling to keep my memories.

Before I forgot, while I still had memories of this truth, there were things I wanted to pass on. There were things that had to be passed on no matter what.

Kotonoha was a leaf that transmitted memories.

I had to choose.

I had to choose who to send these memories to and when.

A single *Kotonoha* leaf.

I poured my memories into it with all my effort.



Please don’t let go of the truth—

The anguish of believing he had been abandoned by his mother.

The joy of knowing of her love.

And more than anything else, to destroy the lie created by that world that lived on due to her sacrifice along with a strong desire for the truth hidden here to never be abandoned.

Those were the feelings packed into this single *Kotonoha* leaf.

Seeing that, I finally understood the events we were shown and the reason why we were here.

As Kairi couldn't stop himself from forgetting after making his choice, he entrusted his memories to those who would one day have to make the same choice he did.

Specifically, it was for people who were hesitant to let go of the truth.

Had we really been resolute in our decision to forget everything, Saki and I probably wouldn't have ended up here in the first place. Everything, including the truth hidden inside *Kotonoha*, would have been swallowed up by the Calamity. The fact that Towako-san wasn't here with us was the best proof of that.

Maybe I had hesitated at the last second.

I raised my hand in the air.

In it, was the *Kotonoha* filled with Kairi's memories.

We came into contact with the truth contained in this leaf, and that was what stopped us from going home.

Meaning I had to make the choice one more time.

I understood Kairi's wishes, but I still had to make my decision—this time for real.

Should I let go of the truth and return home?

Or should I keep the truth and remain inside the *Calamity Jar*?

There was, of course, only one obvious choice. Even now that I knew about Kairi's memories, I wouldn't make any mistakes here.

But before that, there was something I needed to confirm.

"Saki, can you abandon the truth?"

She was on her knees next to the *Calamity Jar*, her back turned to me.

Now that I knew the truth about *Kotonoha*, the vision where I disappeared and Saki remained after it was destroyed could only mean one thing.

—Saki had chosen to remain here without abandoning the truth. That's what *Vision* was trying to tell me.

Saki's back looked smaller than ever as she turned around. I thought I'd see her usual poker face when she faced me, but instead she looked shocked.

She must have sympathized so much with the memories she saw that she was hesitant to let go of the truth. The fact that she saw *Kotonoha*'s memories like I did was the best proof of that.

That's why she wanted to change something. She wanted to interfere—to do something and change this past.

"Saki, give it up. Everything we saw already happened a long time ago." I told her what would happen next. "Pandora most likely sealed the Calamity again afterwards."

She was the only one who had that ability. The truth had become distorted by the records saying that the Calamity was sealed due to the priestess's prayers, but the documents also said that the second opening of the *Calamity jar* was safely resolved. The Calamity was sealed, and everyone, including Pandora's sister, forgot the truth.

"It's already over. There's nothing we can do."

"...We can't do anything?"

"Yeah."

"We can't change the past?"

"Yeah."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what." I repeated and forced Saki to face reality. "We'll never be able to change the past no matter what we do."

Saki slowly turned around.

—Why?

I couldn't help but ask.

Why did she look like that—?

But I couldn't voice my question. Saki's face wasn't as expressionless as usual when she looked at me—

—it was warped in grief.



My mother said she understood.

That's why I believed that my feelings had reached her.

I believed there were things that could be transmitted even without words.

That's why what I needed to pass on weren't my feelings of gratitude towards her.

What I had to do was protect my mother's memory.

It wasn't enough, but this was all I could do to repay her kindness.

But I couldn't choose to keep the truth myself.

If I did that, then there would be no meaning in my mother sacrificing herself and sealing the calamity so I could live on.

That's why, even one person was enough.

To those who one day stumble upon this truth. And to those who are hesitant to let it go.

I implore you, please do not abandon the truth.

This is the story of one mother who loved her child, and gave herself to save the world he lived in.

For me.

And for all those who have forgotten, please

Never let this truth be forgotten.



"Tokiya, it's not because I sympathize with them."

Her words left me confused.

It wasn't sympathy? That couldn't be right. The memories in Kairi's *Kotonoha* were sent to everyone why sympathized with his mother and had doubts about letting go of the truth. She would have never seen the memories had she not felt some sympathy.

Saki stood silently, now back to her usual poker face.

However, there were cracks in her expression.

A stark difference from how she usually was, it felt like she was struggling to hold back her feelings.

Why? Why was she making a face like that?

Was it really not out of sympathy?

If it wasn't sympathy, then why did she look like that?

"I wasn't sure whether or not I wanted to stay in the world, so I was hesitant to let go of the truth."

...I see. So that's what it was.

Kairi wanted to pass his memories on to people who were hesitant to let go of the truth.

It didn't matter what the reason was.

No, to be specific, he didn't consider that there could be any other reason.

But if what Saki said was true, there was still something I didn't understand.

Why did she need to be torn about leaving or staying in this world?

What meaning was there in remaining here?

—Where did Saki's true goal lie?

"I asked if there was anything we could do to interfere with the events *Kotonoha* showed us, but it wasn't because I wanted to save Pandora and the others."

"Why then?" I asked, my voice hoarser than I thought it would be.

But Saki did not answer.

Instead, she turned a question on me.

"Hey, what would you do if I asked you to stay here together with me?"

My first thought was that this was an extension of *Kotonoha*'s power. I thought that maybe it was taking Saki's form to shake my resolve and try to stop me from abandoning the truth.

"What kind of ridiculous..." I somehow managed to squeeze out a reply.

Saki ignored my useless reply and stared at me.

"So, what would you do?" Her question didn't change.

"Even if you ask me what I'd do..."

"Answer me."

"You're asking me that, but..."

"Answer me!" She was shouting now.

It wasn't like her at all. But that was exactly why I had to answer.

I had to answer truthfully, without any lies or deceit.

This wasn't a hypothetical question.

What would I do if Saki really asked me to stay here with her?

What would happen if I said I'd stay?

What would happen if I said I wouldn't?

"...Answer me."

I answered Saki's question.

—I wouldn't stay.

"...I see." She muttered softly.

For an instant, Saki seemed so far away. Almost as if I alone was going to return home, and she alone would remain here.

"That's not it!"

I panicked and grabbed Saki's hand.

I held her hand. There was only an arm's length of distance between us. Yet it felt like I was still so far away from her.

"That's not what I meant!"

I denied it. I denied the mistaken meaning in my own words.

"I'm taking you back home with me!"

That was my answer.

It had nothing to do with the answer Saki was expecting.

It was my only true, honest, genuine answer.

"Let go of the truth and go back home with me....no, I'm going to take you back with me. No matter what."

I brought Saki closer and hugged her. It was an embrace only to stop her from moving.

So that I'd never let her go.

So that I wouldn't leave her here alone.

I didn't want to ask her why she said that.

Because I'd surely forget once we returned to our world.

There was no point even if she told me.

...It definitely wasn't because I was afraid.

"Saki, is that alright?"

I couldn't see her expression since her face was buried in my chest, but I did feel a small nod.

Choosing to believe that nod, I crushed *Kotonoha* in my hand.

Kairi's memories disappeared, scattering into rainbow colored particles.

Saki began to fade away. She had made her decision to abandon the truth.

I also let go of the truth and swore in my heart.

That I would leave the truth buried in the darkness for good this time.

But that didn't bother me.

I hadn't made the wrong choice.

I brought Saki even closer to me.

She tightly held my arm, her face still buried in my chest.

I wonder what she thought of my answer...



Was I able to convince her, or was she still dissatisfied?

I had taken away her choice and—

“Tokiya, you’re kind.

—But you’re really full of yourself.”



We didn’t get back to the slum until morning. Hito was in the room sleeping next to me.

I ended up getting a long lecture from the priestesses for sneaking into the shrine to steal. On the way back, Hito confessed and returned *Kotonoha* to me.

In the end, Hito didn’t find a *Kotonoha* leaf containing his parent’s words. That’s why the note left by his parents was all he had left to believe.

But he was the same as them.

Hito’s parents gave up their lives to protect him. It wasn’t the right way for them to show their love, but it was still love all the same.

He probably wouldn’t believe me if I told him, but I knew he would understand one day.

Because even Hito gave me his own bread without leaving anything to eat for himself.

I stared at the *Kotonoha* in my hand.

The image of my mother holding me as a baby.

There were no words recorded here, but I could still feel her love.

There were times when I doubted her. There were times when I resented her.

But things were different now.

I didn’t know what it was inside of me.

I felt like I was forgetting something.

But.

Why could I believe in her now?

That I wasn’t thrown away.

And that I was loved—?

But that alone saved Hito and me. We could keep on living.

Mother—

I'm glad I was born your son.



I woke up inside Tsukumodo Antique Shop.

It looked like I had fallen asleep on my break somehow.

I looked towards the store and saw Saki. Her eyes were a little red and there were tears in the corners of her eyes. She must have been feeling drowsy at the storefront.

"Ahh, I'm beat." Towako-san came down the stairs into the living room scratching her long black hair. In her arm was a Relic that she purchased yesterday.

"Did you ever figure out what that thing is?"

Towako-san nodded, and began to explain.

"It's apparently a Relic that can keep any kind of memory to send to anyone at any time."

Its name was *Kotonoha*.

"Wow, that's pretty strange."

"I know, right? It really is a strange power."

"No, what's strange is that you managed to buy something real this time."

Towako-san responded to my pointed observation with her fist.

"But the jar you bought yesterday was fake, wasn't it?"

"Shut up. That one's valuable in its own way."

"It's just really big and inconvenient."

"Come to think of it, where did I even buy that?"

"I don't know. Some shop somewhere? Really, hearing you say that makes me think this might be a fake too..."

I picked up the *Kotonoha* that Towako-san had set on the table.

-----.

It was just for an instant, I felt something like a *vision*.

What was that feeling just now?

“What are you doing, Tokiya?” I heard Saki’s voice.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Must have been my imagination.”

“Alright. Well, come back to the store. Your break’s about over.”

“Suuure.”

I put *Kotonoha* back on the table and walked back to the store.

“Did you not get enough sleep?”

“No, I did.”

“Your eyes are red.”

Saki used her small hand to cover her eyes. However, it was with her usual lack of expression.

Her usual...

“What is it?”

I felt like I had forgotten something hugely important.

But that was probably just my imagination...

Chapter 4 – True Thoughts

Everyone has thoughts they keep hidden.

Everyone has things they don't want to talk about.

Everyone has things they want to say, but can't.

There are some who can steel their resolve and let their thoughts be known.

Some, who end up conveying their true thoughts in the spur of the moment.

Some, who are unable to make the decision to share their true thoughts.

And finally, some who can't say anything until the very end.

Which group do I belong to?

Where do my true thoughts lie?

...I still don't know.

I don't know if these are my real feelings.

And I don't know if I have thoughts that I ought to share.



“How did things end up like this?”

I asked myself as I stood under the clock tower in front of the station where we agreed to meet up.

It was Sunday. Normally I'd be at work at this time.

I was given the day off work today. Me, of all people.

But there was nothing I could do since Towako-san was the one who ordered it. If the shop owner asked me to take a break, then I had to obey. As an employee, the manager's word—regardless of whether Towako-san actually deserved the title—was the law.

That's why I took the day off work.

It definitely wasn't because I wanted to.

That's why I had no choice but to stand here waiting under the clock tower in front of the station.

And I wasn't waiting here just because I felt like it.

That's right, I was waiting for someone.

On a Sunday, just before noon.

Standing under the clock tower.

Feeling a little nervous.

Waiting for him.

...Right. Even I get nervous sometimes.

But it's only when I'm waiting like this to go somewhere with him.



"How did things end up like this?"

I asked myself as I walked towards the clock tower in front of the station where we had agreed to meet up.

It was Sunday. I'd normally be at work around now.

I got the day off today.

...I felt like I had thoughts like this before...but that meeting had been earlier in the day, and was with someone different...

Anyway, Towako-san asked me to take the day off so there was nothing I could do. If the owner was asking me to take a break, then I should obey. As an employee, the manager's word—regardless of whether Towako-san actually deserved the title—was the law.

That's why I took the day off work.

It definitely wasn't because I wanted to.

And that's why I had no choice but to go to the clock tower in front of the station.

I wasn't going because I felt like it.

And by the way, unlike the last meeting, Saki knew about this one.

Meaning, Towako-san told Saki the same thing she told me.

In other words, the person I was meeting was Saki.

“Really, how did things end up like this?”



It all started yesterday.

As usual, Towako-san was telling us about some item she went out and bought.

She said this particular Relic was called *Kotonoha*.

It was apparently a Relic that anyone could use to hold their thoughts and memories at any time. The thoughts poured into the leaf could be sent to whoever the user desired whenever they wanted even after, for example, their own death.

It was oddly harmless for a Relic and even seemed kind of useful. Towako-san then pulled off two rainbow-colored leaves from the potted *Kotonoha* plant,

“The two of you get one each.”

And gave them to us.

Tokiya and I took the leaves she gave us and looked at each other.

“Well that’s unusual. Towako-san’s giving us a Relic.”

It wasn’t the first time it had happened, but that didn’t make it any less strange. Towako-san hated giving Relics to people. It wasn’t just because she was a Relic collector, but also because Relics often brought misfortune to those who came to use them.

“Well, this probably won’t get you in trouble no matter what happens.”

“Huh?”

“And you two have things you want to convey but can’t say, right?”

Tokiya and I looked at each other at the same time.

“I don’t really have anything to convey to Tokiya that I can’t put into words.”

“I don’t really have anything to convey to Saki that I can’t put into words.”

We both denied it at the same time, but...

“Not once did I say it was things you can’t convey to anyone *in particular*.” Towako-san had an extremely unpleasant smile on her face now.

I looked at Tokiya again.

“The way you said it made it sound like that, don’t overthink it.”

“The way you said it made it sound like that, don’t overthink it.”

We answered the same way again.

“Hahaha. Well, I guess that’s fine. I want you to hold onto them anyway.”

Towako-san paid us no mind at all, laughing loudly as she forced *Kotonoha* onto us.

“I don’t really need it.”

“Yeah, me neither. If there was something I wanted to say, I’d just say it.”

But Towako-san didn’t let us return the leaves and forced them into our hands.

“It’s fine, just keep them. You’ll need them someday.”

Since Towako-san insisted on giving them to us, Tokiya and I looked at each other one more time and decided to accept the *Kotonoha* leaves.

But I really didn’t have anything I wanted to convey so badly that I’d use *Kotonoha*. Not to steal Tokiya’s words, but if there was something I wanted to say, I would say it myself.

In fact, I didn’t really have anything special I wanted to tell Tokiya, like Towako-san was insinuating. There wasn’t anything I was having trouble putting into words. There really wasn’t.

...Probably.

“Well, it’s not like I *can’t* say it, but I guess I have something.”

But Tokiya was different. He had something to say.

“Huh?”

“Mm?”

I looked at Tokiya without thinking, and he looked at me as if nothing at all were amiss.

“And is this about me?”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

I stared at Tokiya.

What was it?

Did he have something he wanted to convey but couldn’t put into words?”

“So...what is it?” I asked.

It’s wasn’t like I was that interested.

I wasn't desperate to know or anything.

But I was curious.

Just a little bit curious.

It looked like this was something difficult for Tokiya to say, or maybe he was thinking about how to phrase it. After spending some time putting his thoughts in order, he finally looked at me.

I stared back, waiting for his words.

"I've been thinking about this for a while and..."

"...Uh huh."

"and I'll get right to the point but..."

"...Uh huh."

"Wearing nothing but black is pretty weird."

".....Excuse me?"

I froze for a full 20 seconds before sputtering out a reply.

"I mean, it's just...I get liking black, but I was wondering what it would be like if you wore something different every once in a while. Wearing all black all the time is weird, right?"

Did he really have to say that?

"I mean, I know you have lots of similar looking clothes. I do understand that you're not actually wearing the same thing all the time, of course."

This was what he always wanted to tell me?

My feelings had now withered into cold disappointment.

"I also have something I've been thinking about for a while, but haven't told you..." I continued, my voice quieter than it usually was.

"I don't want to hear you say anything about my clothes when everything you wear is cheap."

"Wha—!"

"I'll acknowledge that your style has a little variation, *just* a little. However, everything you wear is still cheap. And it's not like you have good clothing that happens to be inexpensive either, it's all just cheap. The best thing you own is your school uniform, isn't it? Just look at the shirt you wore to work today. Look at how the collar's all worn out. Didn't you buy it recently? I wonder how it ended up looking like *that* after a single wash?"

“You didn’t have to go that far!”

“Oh, but I’m not done. You know the clothes you wore last weekend? Well, they didn’t match at all. And not only that, the colors were already fading too. My guess is because it was so cheap.”

“All you say is cheap, cheap, cheap, But I can’t do anything about that, okay! My salary here sucks!”

“Well, my salary’s low too, and I make do with what I have to buy good things. Of course, the things I buy cost more.”

“But you don’t have living expenses, right? I don’t have any money to spend on clothes thanks to mine.”

“Just how low do you think my living expenses are? I also have my own things to pay for, you know. Even if my income is low, and the number of sales is abysmal, and my personal finances look depressing, I can still buy nice things even without spending money on clothes. It’s just a matter of sense.”

“You say that, but you get paid more than me don’t you?”

“Naturally. I spend more time at work after all.”

“Cause I have to go to school. And I doubt you even have much to do since we never get any customers during the day.”

“Certainly, customers are few and far between, but dealing with them is only one part of my job. I also manage inventory, so the work I do is worth much more than the paltry salary I get.”

Suddenly—

“...Cut it out, you two.” Towako-san cut us off in a menacing voice.

She seemed angry for some reason.

I wonder why...were we being too loud?

How careless. I got riled up by Tokiya’s mean words and was being louder than usual.

“I’m sorry, Towako-san. I shouldn’t have shouted.”

“I lost my cool after what Saki said to me.”

We both apologized for being loud, but Towako-san’s anger didn’t subside.

“Since you’ve said all that, the two of you will go shopping and pick clothes for each other. I’ll be the one to judge who can buy better clothes with their awful salaries!”

And that’s the gist of it.

After that, Tokiya and I agreed to meet up the next day, Sunday, and go shopping to choose clothes for each other.

We were both agitated at the time and quickly agreed on a time and place to meet up. But now that things had settled down, this was starting to feel like, how to say it...

“...A date.”

I furiously shook my head.

T-this was just a shopping trip. It wasn’t anything special like a date or anything. And Towako-san told us to do this in the first place, so it’s not like I had any say in the matter.

“Ah, I shouldn’t do that.”

My hair was a mess now because I shook my head too hard.

I took out a pocket mirror and start combing through it with my fingers. My hat also happened to be lopsided so I readjusted that too.

“Yep, perfect.”

...I wasn’t dressing up more than I had to, nor was I trying to be especially fashionable. I was just taking care of my appearance. This was something I always did.

“Did you wait?”

A voice suddenly called out, and I turned around, startled.

But the person they were calling out to wasn’t me, but another girl waiting at the same meeting spot.

I checked the time again...it was now almost noon. It seemed a lot of other people had also agreed to meet up at this time. I heard similar things from other couples around me like

“Did you wait long?” “Not at all.” and

“Did I make you wait?” “You’re late.” and

“Who is it?” “Darling!” and

“I’m back.” “Welcome back, master.”

It was about time Tokiya showed up too.

I didn’t have to greet him...

But still, what would be the best thing to say here?

Not to brag, but this was my first time meeting up with someone.

Of course, I *have* met up normally with people before. I'm just saying that I haven't waited for someone like this.

Well, I say *like this*, but even this is a normal meeting. I'm just meeting up with him to go on a simple shopping trip is all.

...It's just *special* because I'm going with Tokiya.

And by *special*, I don't mean anything weird. It's just that I've never gone anywhere with him before.

Wait, was that true?

Well, I've never gone out with him for something like this before anyway.

And when I say *like this*, I mean that it's just a little different from usual. Tokiya and I agreed to meet up here today to go shopping. It was nothing more than that.

...I got a little carried away there. Rather than thinking about that, I had to come up with a plan soon.

Going by the clock, there were only 10 seconds left until noon.

How should I greet Tokiya when he finally gets here? If the people I observed around me were anything to go by, there was a high chance that he'll start with, "Did you wait long?"

In that case, should I respond with, "Not at all"?

Or should I be direct and tell him I've been waiting for 30 minutes?

I'm really precise about the time and didn't want to be late today, so I got here half an hour early. But that time passed by in the blink of an eye; it didn't feel like I waited long.

And more than anything, just because I was half an hour early didn't mean that Tokiya was late.

In the first place, if I told him I came 30 minutes early, he might misunderstand and think I was really looking forward to this. Really, the reason I arrived early was because I was careful about being on time.

In that case, maybe saying "I just got here." Would be the better option.

But then I'd feel like I was lying to him. Was it really fine to lie like that?

According to the book I read, **With This, You Too Can Become a Dating Master!** (I ran out to buy it in a panic last night), there was no problem with that kind of lie since it was only to show consideration for your partner.

I guess that's what I'll go with after all.

The clock struck 12 as I was lost in my thoughts. It was now time.

Wait a second.

If Tokiya came now and said, “Did you wait long?” and I responded with, “I just got here”, wouldn’t that mean that I was *also* late?

It wouldn’t look good if he thought I was late for our first meeting, right?

But Tokiya himself was also late...

I remembered reading something about this last night in **With This, You Too Can Become a Dating Master!**

Don’t get angry even if your partner is late for the first date. It was most likely because they were too nervous to sleep the night before and overslept. They might have also spent too much time thinking about what to wear and kept uneasily changing their clothes, or maybe the hairstyle they had didn’t look quite right and they changed it at the last second.

If you want to have an enjoyable date, don’t fret if your partner is a little late!

But since Tokiya might not have read **With This, You Too Can Become a Dating Master!** I doubted he’d know that.

Saying that I just got here was too risky after all.

So, should I go back to my first idea and say “Not at all,” or “I’ve been waiting here for over 35 minutes now?”

Ahh, I wanted to go back to my first idea, but there were actually two options here. I was careless. I actually had three options to choose from and now I had to choose between the first and second.

I didn’t have the time to waste thinking about something like that.

Which of the two options should I choose?

I need to hurry up and decide. Tokiya was going to be here any minute now.

“Ah, so you were here?”

“!”

I heard Tokiya’s voice behind me.

“There were a lot of people here, so it took a bit to find you. Did you wait long?”

W-wait a minute. This was outside of my predictions.

I did expect Tokiya to ask me if I waited long, but I didn’t plan for a scenario where he came to the meeting place on time, but got unexpectedly delayed looking for me.

Should I tell him I was waiting for over 30 minutes, or should I play it safe and say I didn't wait at all? Or should I go in another direction altogether and say I just got here? But then that would imply that I was five minutes late since Tokiya couldn't find me. What do I do...

"Saki?"

"W-welcome!"

In my confusion, the first thing that came out of my mouth were the words I was used to saying the most.

My true vocation is in customer service after all.



"W-welcome!"

".....huh?"

Saki's reply made no sense. Maybe she was still half asleep.

I didn't get much sleep myself and worried that my eyes were red.

Saki's eyes looked okay, but she did seem a little tired. She wasn't the type to stand in crowds on Sundays, so I supposed she would find waiting here for me exhausting.

But despite looking tired, Saki also seemed fired up today. This could be just me making assumptions, but she was clearly more excited than usual.

Her outfit was black as always, but today she wore a small hat on her head, not to protect her from the sunlight, but as an accessory. Her blouse was narrower than usual, and with it, she wore a long, tight skirt with a slit going up to the knee. Her knee-high socks were partially visible under her skirt.

That wasn't all though. Saki was also wearing leather shoes with small high heels along with a leather bag that she held in her hand. She also had a black leather watch on her left wrist. Lastly, she had changed her usual hairstyle and was wearing twin tails.



Seeing her made me remember what happened yesterday.

I must have hit a nerve for the Saki I knew to lose her cool like that. That was probably reflected in the clothes she wore today.

Saki was particular when it came to clothes...or maybe I should say when it came to the color black.

Either way, I said more than I should have. Had I not brought the subject up, things wouldn't have ended up like this.

Saki and I wouldn't be going on this da—no, this shopping trip together.

...Oh well. To be honest, since Towako-san approved of us taking the day off, I didn't think this was a bad thing at all, but I somehow got the feeling it would have been better for things not to have developed as they did.

“What is it?”

“Nah, it's nothing. Why don't we get going?”

Saki and I went into the train station building where we met up. I had actually been here before, and if you wanted to go shopping in the area, this was the place.

“There are a lot of clothing stores here, and also lots of restaurants. Do you want to check out this new pasta place since it's already lunchtime? It's pretty popular. Oh, there's also a great teashop nearby. It's a bit expensive, would that be alright with you? But as far as cakes go, the shop right next to it is actually much better.”

“You know...quite a lot.”

“Do I? I figured it was normal.”

Like water, I dispensed the knowledge I gleaned from the magazine I bought at the convenience store and from my classmate Shinjou, and casually downplayed it.

By the way, I had never gone to any of the shops I just listed, so my recommendations were all from the magazine and Shinjou—or to be more accurate, his girlfriend.

In other words, this was why I didn't get enough sleep.

I had been here with my friends before, but I didn't really pay attention then. They already knew their way around the place anyway.

But I didn't think Saki would have the same knowledge.

Clothes and shopping were one thing, but this wasn't the sort of place where one could have meals alone. That's why it was no surprise that Saki didn't know about the food options.

It would have been awkward to have us both standing around wondering what to do. That's why I had no choice but to do some research.

...It definitely wasn't because I wanted to look good.

I didn't want to show off about having done research beforehand either. That's why I didn't say I learned this information from reading magazines and talking to friends.

...It definitely wasn't because desperate, last minute research was uncool.

Really.

So where would Saki want to go? I already decided if she let me choose, I'd suggest going to the pasta place. By the way, the recommended pasta was lasagna. Not gratin or risotto, but lasagna.

"I had a late breakfast so I'm not really hungry. Let go look at clothes instead."

"T-that so?"

...I hadn't expected that development.

Oh well. Considering how this would save me some money, it wasn't so bad.

"Let's go to this store I frequent first. Fortunately it's in this building, so I'll choose clothes for you there, Tokiya."

Saki briskly started walking.



"You know...quite a lot." I found myself saying to Tokiya.

He hadn't said anything special, but something bothered me about how excited he was. It felt a little disconcerting that Tokiya knew so much about this place. If I had to say, I expected him to look annoyed and say it didn't matter which store we went to, or that he would just go with whatever I chose.

He must come here often with his friends.

Right. It must have been...with his friends.

...I had an uncomfortable feeling in my chest for some reason.

Perhaps it was heartburn. I hadn't eaten anything especially heavy for breakfast though.

But it was true that I wasn't hungry.

Maybe it was because waiting in a crowd and being in a situation I wasn't used to tired me out. That's why I quickly walked away from Tokiya to cut the conversation short.

"Do you go to this store often?"

"Yeah."

We were at a store that I frequented, and my feelings had calmed down a little now. Clothing stores were usually on the upper floor, but this was one of the few that was underground. It didn't deal in clothes that were currently in fashion, and as a result, there were fewer customers. I enjoyed the store's relaxed atmosphere.

That said, the clothes this store sold were not bad by any means. They also sold men's clothes in addition to women's clothes, of course.

"Good afternoon, Maino-san." A familiar employee greeted me. She was a little younger than Towako-san, but the atmosphere around her was gentler and more mature.

But now she had an expression of surprise on her face. Probably because I brought Tokiya with me.

"I came to find clothes for him today."

"I see. Please let me know if there's anything I can help with." She said that and went back to the register.

They didn't use any shady high-pressure sales tactics here so I could take my time to find something good. That was one of the reasons I liked this place.

"Over here." I called Tokiya over.

I was already thinking of what kind of clothes I should get him to wear.

He usually preferred "rough" or "fun" clothing, so I was thinking of having him try something a little more stylish. I saw him wear a suit before, and it wasn't bad at all. But since getting him a suit was overkill...

"How about this?"

I picked out a tie-dye t-shirt, collared jacket, and leather pants for him.

"The fitting room's over there."

Tokiya took the clothes with him to the fitting room, and came out wearing them after a short while.

Yeah, not bad...it really suited him. I was really happy with it.

"That looks good. Tokiya, what do you think?"

“Yeah, I think it’s fine.”

“Really? Alright, you want to go with that? Or do you want to try something else?”

For me, this was the best outfit in terms of style and price.

“Let’s see. I think I’ll go with this. Saki, I’ll go change while you pay for it.”

“Huh?”

“It’s fair because I’m going to pay for your clothes, right? Or were you trying to get me to pay for both?”

“I had no such plans.”

“Alright, I’ll leave it to you then.”

Tokiya went back into the fitting room.

I had forgotten. We weren’t just choosing clothes for each other today.

...I was worried about his wallet too. I would have gotten him something more expensive had I remembered.

I walked over to the register to pay.

“Is this a present?” The store clerk asked me as she rang up the total.

“...Something like that.”

I supposed this would be a present.

I unconsciously touched the pendant under my blouse. This kind of reminded me of my feelings back then. It was a nostalgic memory now, but still a very important one.

“Did something good happen?” The store clerk asked me, but I responded with a startled “Huh?”

“You’ve got that look on your face.”

“Oh...nothing really happened.”

As expected of a fellow member of the service industry. I didn’t let it show on my face, but she could still guess how I was feeling.

...Wait. Did something good actually happen? Still, it was true that the uneasy feeling I had in my chest was completely gone now.

“I see. By the way, this is pretty unusual...I’ve never seen you come here with someone else before. What kind of relationship do you have?”

“We work at the same place.”

“Ah, so you get along well then.”

“Um, not really. We don’t have that kind of relationshi—more importantly, do you have that dress you told me about last time?” I dodged her question and changed the topic.

“Oh I’m sorry. We’re all sold out here. It’s actually sold out everywhere except the main store. I’ll let you know as soon as we have more in stock, okay?”

“No, that’s alright. I’ll come back another day.”

The store clerk finished putting the clothes that I got for Tokiya in a bag, and said one more thing.

“But it seems like you two have a really good relationship. How to say this, Maino-san, it feels like you’re a lot gentler than usual. Like you’ve let your guard down.”

I let my guard down...

Maybe that was it.

Tokiya was the only person I could open my heart to...

I felt my earlier irritation being flooded over by a gentle warmth.



The clothes I tried on at Saki’s recommendation felt two levels higher than what I was used.

It didn’t cost that much more either. Well, it was far more expensive than what I usually bought, but not enough to make my eyes pop out.

And most importantly, Saki found clothes I really liked in one shot.

...That Saki, she’s serious.

She wants to show me what she can really do.

I was naïve, thinking about what we were going to have for lunch. That’s not what we were here for. This was a match to decide which one of had better fashion sense.

Alright. I’d have to show her how serious I was too.

I psyched myself up and stepped out of the fitting room. Saki was standing outside holding a bag with my new clothes.

“Okay, it’s my turn now.” I said as we waited for the elevator. However, Saki unexpectedly pulled on my sleeve.

"I'm actually feeling hungry now. Do you think we can go to the pasta restaurant you talked about before?"

"Wha-?" I could only respond stupidly as she poured cold water on my excitement.

"We can't?"

"N-no, I don't mind."

So she had time to spare now that her turn was over...

Well, it wasn't so bad if I could use that time to get my thoughts in order. And more importantly, I couldn't let all the research I did last night go to waste. Saki and I went to the pasta restaurant that was also said to have good lasagna.

The restaurant was crowded for lunch when we came in, but fortunately, we were able to secure a pair of open seats right away.

I waited for Saki to open the menu before casually speaking up.

"You know, this is a pasta restaurant, but the lasagna's highly recommended."

"Oh really? I suppose I'll get that then."

"What kind of pasta should I order then?"

"How big is the lasagna?"

"How big?"

"Yeah. Won't there be too much food if we order pasta too?"

...I had no idea. My hasty preparation had been met with an unexpected obstacle. I never expected her to be concerned about the lasagna's size.

"N-no, I don't thi—it's not that big."

"I see..."

She still seemed concerned about it.

"Even if it ends up being too much, I'll eat it."

"Alright then. Why don't you get the carbonara?"

"There's squid ink pasta too. That's black."

"I have no interest in blackening my teeth."

"Of course. Are you okay with black tea for your drink?"

“Yeah. I’ll order it after the meal.”

I called the server over, and made my order.

“I’d like one carbonara with eggplant and meat sauce.”

“Understood.”

“And then one plate of lasagna.”

“Oh—I’m very sorry. We don’t serve lasagna here.”

“Huh?”

What the hell? This isn’t what you told me, Shinjou! You recommended the lasagna here, didn’t you?

I glanced at Saki. She was looking at me with her usual poker face.

“Well t-that’s odd...I definitely saw it before. The menu must have changed since I was last here.”

“Not at all. This restaurant has not served lasagna since it first opened.”

You don’t have to say that much! I shouted internally.

“While we don’t have lasagna, there is ravioli on the menu, if you’d like that.”

“Alright. Okay, I’ll order that then.”

Shinjou...only the first syllable kind of sounds the same! And what the hell is ravioli anyway?

I came back to my senses and looked at Saki’s reaction. Her face was blank as always, and I had no idea what she was thinking.

“M-my bad.”

“It’s alright. Ravioli sounds tasty too.”

“Now that I think about it, it was a different restaurant that had lasagna. There are a lot of similar restaurants and I mixed them up.”

I tried to explain away my misunderstanding (really, it was a mistake), and feigned a laugh.

Saki stared at me with probing eyes.

Not good. Was Saki starting to notice my hasty preparations falling apart?



The pasta and ravioli were both delicious.

It was unfortunate that I wasn't able to eat the lasagna that Tokiya recommended though. I'd like to try that if the opportunity came up next time.

...Not to say I was hoping for another opportunity.

I realized that we forgot to order tea after the meal, so we went to the other teashop that Tokiya recommended earlier. However, our timing was bad and that shop was in the middle of being covered for a TV program. We tried waiting for a little, but it seemed filming was going to continue for longer than we expected. The shop probably wouldn't open again until evening.

I guess I'd also have to come back for this another day.

...Not necessarily together with Tokiya though.

But besides that, I always thought Tokiya was someone who would be most knowledgeable about convenience store bento boxes; I didn't expect him to know about restaurants like that.

It wasn't just that he knew about them, he apparently went to restaurants like that often. I always thought Tokiya had his hands full with his daily life, but apparently he had enough free time to go hang out with his friends all the time.

Of course, that was it. He was cutting down on his living expenses to save money to have fun. The ones he spent time with were probably his classmates at school.

"Alright, how about we get back to buying clothes."

"Since we're already here, why don't we take a look around the shops?"

"Hm?"

"You don't want to?"

"No, I don't mind."

The pasta and ravioli were both delicious, but it was a little too much for me. It was careless of me to keep eating until my stomach was completely full while we were out to buy clothes.

...It probably wouldn't have any effect on my waist size, but still...

I wouldn't mind if I were alone, but not being able to fit into the clothes Tokiya chose for me would be way too embarrassing.

I'd have to walk around to calm my stomach down.

"Alright, let's take a walk."

"Yeah."

Tokiya and I went downstairs from the restaurant area to wander and look around stores.

It would be an exaggeration to call it a shopping mall, but there were lots of things like home décor and imported goods stores, electronics stores, and CD shops.

Just walking around would take at least ten minutes.

This was a popular date spot. The number of couples I saw around us outnumbered the families.

...Do Tokiya and I look like that too?

When I thought that, walking together side by side with Tokiya suddenly felt embarrassing. The people around us were probably not looking at us like that though.

“Ah, come to think of it, last time I saw there was a special for the books you like.”

“The books I like?”

“Yeah, it was a special for know-how and self-help books like *With This, You Too Can Become XX*.”

I didn’t especially like those books though. I only read them because they contained necessary information.

Leaving aside Tokiya’s misunderstanding about my favorite books, I decided to go along with his kind suggestion and went into the bookstore.

“Huh?” Tokiya was looking around restlessly.

“What’s wrong?”

The specials corner had romance novels in it now. Well, I didn’t particularly hate novels either. I looked over the books on the shelf.

Tokiya, who had gone to ask a shop employee, sounded disappointed when he returned.

“Apparently it’s over.”

“Is it?”

“Sorry.”

“It’s alright. Don’t worry about it.”

There wasn’t anything I wanted to know right now, so I didn’t want to buy them anyway.

“I definitely saw them the last time I came here though.”

“Hmm. With your friends?”

“Huh? Uhh no...I came here on my way home from school to buy reference books.”

That was a lie. There's no way Tokiya would go out of his way to buy reference books. By why would he lie about that? Ah, did that also mean that perhaps what he said about coming alone was also...

"Anyway, why don't we go to that store over there? They sell a bunch of things."

Tokiya sneakily changed the subject and the two of us left the store. I wanted to look at the new releases a little longer, but gave up on that and followed Tokiya out.

"So what kind of store is it?"

"It sells accessories for girls."

"Oh does it now—"

I followed after Tokiya, and he stood in front of a store that sold cute accessories that were marketed to middle and high school girls. I didn't have any interest in the gaudy sort of things they sold here.

Moreover, this wasn't the type of store Tokiya would have gone to alone.

I stared fixedly at Tokiya.

"Ah, I know you don't like the way it looks, but they also have things you might enjoy."

Tokiya misunderstood my problem and went into the store, signaling for me to come in too.

I reluctantly walked into the store.

The items lined up on display were the type that middle and high school girls would casually buy. There wasn't anything that I liked though.

"Huh? I could swear it was around here..."

Tokiya was looking at a display with pendants arranged on it.

He was trying to buy me a pendant?

Did he forget about the pendant he already gave me?

Or was he going to insist on buying a second one?

Even though the pendant I had wasn't something that could just be replaced.

"Enough already."

I walked out of the accessory shop and left Tokiya behind.

"H-hey." Tokiya panicked and followed after me.

"Listen, it really was there the last time I was here."

“With your friends from school?”

“Huh? Oh...uhh...yeah. With Shinjou.”

“Is that so. This Shinjou-kun sure has cute taste, doesn’t he?”

“Huh? Oh, that’s not it. We came together to pick out a present for his girlfriend. I even told him he should pick out the present himself.”

“I see. Why don’t we go shopping for clothes now?”

“S-sure. Shall we go?” Tokiya said and headed to the escalator going upstairs.

As I followed after him, I looked back.

I knew it, this wasn’t the sort of place Tokiya would visit alone. It wasn’t a store he’d go to with a male friend either. That story about choosing a present was doubtful too.

In that case, who did he go with?

Come to think of it, there was I time I saw Tokiya out with a girl before, and it was definitely in this building.

I hadn’t been tailing him or anything...I just happened to see it. How careless of me to have forgotten.

“Unbelievable.”

Was I supposed to be upset that he was taking me along the same route as that other girl?

Or was I supposed to feel happy that he was thinking of me at the time?

“...What a complicated feeling.”



Everything was going wrong. I couldn’t find anything good at the bookstore or the accessory shop.

I hadn’t considered anything besides clothes and food for our trip today. I took my chances and chose shops at random, but none of them had anything that Saki liked. If only I had been more flexible. It went to show how naïve I had been.

Things were starting to look good after Saki picked out my clothes, but there was an awkward air between us now.

Was she starting to see through my façade?

Now that it had come to this, I'd have to redeem myself by choosing something nice for her
Wait, this was supposed to be a competition.

But still, I wanted to impress her. The fact that we were competing didn't change that.

I had done my research on clothing stores, but wasn't feeling very confident since most of the information came from Shinjou's girlfriend. If I had been given even one more week, I would have had more time to research. If nothing else, the store they recommended was featured in magazines so it definitely wouldn't be some weird place. I couldn't go wrong by getting whatever the shop clerks recommended for Saki.

I really hoped I hadn't made a mistake and the shop was open today.

The store slowly came into view as we went up the escalator.

...It was open. Thank goodness. I wouldn't have known what to do if they were closed.

I called Saki over and guided her to the front of the store. She stood in front of the door for a minute while she peered inside.

"They only sell women's clothes here."

"Well yeah. I'm picking out stuff for you so it makes sense right?"

"Did you come here with someone before?"

"Huh?"

"Did you come here with someone?"

"No, I can't say I've been here with anyone...why does that matter anyway?"

Not good. She was totally suspicious.

"...Tokiya, you *are* going to choose the clothes yourself, right? There's no point if someone else does it."

S-she's sharp.

"Oh, don't worry. I only chose this place because the shops I normally go to only sell men's clothes. I came here once since the store is pretty famous and I thought the things they sold were pretty nice. Even I know how to pick out clothes you know."

I panicked and made up another lie. Just how many times had I lied to her today

I'd be in a lot of hot water right now if there were a Relic that could see through lies.

...Oh wait, there was a Relic like that.

I glanced at Saki's ears. Naturally she wasn't wearing anything on them. What a relief.

"...Is that so. I'll leave it to you then. Your choice of clothes, that is."

"G-got it. I'll be sure not to ask any employees for help."

Aah, I was tightening the noose around my own neck.



The store was really busy today.

They sold all sorts of things here like T-shirts, dresses and jackets. There were also many types of skirts and underwear too. With so many things to choose from, anyone could find at least one thing they'd like.

I looked up at Tokiya.

Had he really just happened to visit this store before?

"Just so you know, my choices will be different what you usually wear."

He said that and went further into the store.

The ominous feeling I had in my gut must have been my imagination.



"Girls who always wear the same types of clothes don't have that spirit of adventure. When choosing clothes for girls like that, you have to get something that's the complete opposite of what they would normally wear."

Going by that logic, what she needs...

"...Is this!"



Tokiya returned with a bright yellow t-shirt and green hotpants.

“Are you trying to make me angry?”

“No, I’m serious.”

“You’re seriously trying to make me angry?”

“No really. I was thinking it would be nice for you to wear something that isn’t black for a change. That’s what started all this right?”

“Right, and that’s why you’re trying to make me wear *this*? ”

“Well putting it that way is a little...”

“So in other words, you’ve always wanted to see me wearing a form fitting shirt that almost exposes my belly button and hot pants that barely goes over my butt, right?”

“That’s terrible. You’re make it sound even worse than it is”

“Limit that sort of stuff to your imagination.”

“Imagination...?”

“I take that back. Don’t even imagine it.”

I stomped on Tokiya’s toes with the heel of my leather shoe and thrust the clothes he brought into his arms as he winced in pain.

“Try again.”



“Girls who are picky about fashion tend to value originality. When choosing clothes for girls like that, you have to get something unconventional that they’ve never worn before.”

Going by that logic, what she needs...

“...Is this!”



Tokiya returned with an outfit that looked like a pink nurse uniform.

“Are you trying to make me angry?”

“No, I’m serious.”

“You’re seriously trying to make me angry?”

“No really. I was thinking there’d be no point if I got you the same clothes you always wear. I said it before, didn’t I?”

“Right, and that’s why you’re trying to make me wear *this*? ”

“Well putting it that way is a little...”

“So in other words, you’re hoping I’ll nurse you in a uniform with a heart shape cut out at the chest for some reason and a skirt 20 centimeters above my knees that bares my thighs? ”

“That’s terrible. You’re make it sound even worse than it is.”

“If you like nurses that much I’ll take you to a nice hospital next time.”

“Hospital...?”

“Yes, a neurosurgeon.”

I stomped on Tokiya’s toes with the heel of my leather shoe and thrust the clothes he brought into his arms as he winced in pain.

“Try again.”



“Girls that puts a lot of effort into accessories tend to be picky about details. When choosing clothes for girls like that, you have to get something with lots of little trinkets.”

Going by that logic, what she needs...

“...Is this!”



Tokiya returned with a bizarre outfit that looked like a swimsuit with feathers.

“Are you trying to make me angry?”

“No, I’m serious.”

“You’re seriously trying to make me angry?”

“No really. You’re always cooped up in the store, so I was thinking it would be nice if you wore something more open from time to time.”

“I see. And that’s why you’re trying to make me wear *this*?”

“Well putting it that way is a little...”

“So in other words, you have these wild delusions about me wearing nothing but a swimsuit, and on top of that, you want to see me dance with pink and yellow feathers too?”

“That’s terrible. You’re making it sound even worse than it is.”

If you like samba that much, why don’t you find out the next time the Carnival will be held?”

“Samba...?”

“Don’t forget your passport either.”

I stomped on Tokiya’s toes with the heel of my leather shoe and thrust the clothes he brought into his arms as he winced in pain.

“Try again.”



“Girls that wear whatever they want with no regard for trends probably don’t care much for the clothes they see in magazines and on TV. For girls like that, one idea is to deliberately bring her something trendy. She’ll have an excuse to try it on, and who knows, maybe she’ll come to like it too.”

Going by that logic, what she needs...

“...Is this!”



What Tokiya brought back after that was—

A dress that left everything from the shoulder to the collarbone exposed,

A pair of low rise jeans that would expose my butt if I were to crouch.

A see-through camisole with everything except the chest area transparent.

A pair of capris with cuts in them that even went all the way to my butt.

Not just that, but they were all in bright colors like white, pink, and sky blue.

It wasn't just that either. Unless I was going crazy, everything he picked also exposed a lot of skin.

How to say this.

It was hard to believe that Tokiya wasn't intentionally trying to make me angry.

It made me feel kind of dumb for being so serious when I chose his clothes.

Nothing he brought so far was even worth trying on. There had to be a limit to how far from my preferences he could go.

To be fair, maybe the clothes Tokiya brought were actually popular. I saw a few other girls in the store disappearing into the fitting rooms with similar clothes in hand.

However.

I wanted to hear it straight from him. Did Tokiya actually know who he was choosing clothes for?

And one more thing.

Was he even sane?



"All the suggestions were failures, you guys!"

I was further inside the store complaining to my team of advisors—that is, Shinjou, along with some of my other classmates.

Just to be clear, I didn't plan for them to be here today. After I had asked about recommendations for Saki yesterday, Shinjou went ahead and decided to stop by the store with his girlfriend, Akanuma today. He then happened to tell a classmate about it, who in turn told another, who then told another...and now I had almost half the class here in the store with me.

By the way, Akanuma rejected the clothes I originally chose for Saki.

There wouldn't be any point in buying her anything black, but considering her preference for dark clothing, I had picked out a dark brown shirt along with gray skirt.

According to Akanuma, that was an awful idea.

It wasn't just her either, the others agreed too. As I stood there shocked, they all started presenting their own opinions on what to get Saki, with each of them recommending clothes for me to get her.

The result was as you saw it, a failure.

"Whose turn is it next?"

"Mine." Said a guy who brought forward an outfit that I couldn't even be bothered to describe.

"Forget it! I'll choose something myself!"

I was an idiot for clinging to Shinjou's baseless confidence when he told me to leave it to him. I had realized it sooner...these guys were only here to have fun from the start.



"...Alright, what about this?"

Tokiya returned with a red and black checkered sleeveless dress with a collar. Tokiya must have wanted to be considerate since the bottom part was all black even though the skirt cut off above my knees. This could actually go well with the black knee-high socks I was wearing today.

"I should be barely safe with this right?"

"You're off by a wide margin."

"Umm."

"...Is what I'd like to say, but I suppose this is alright."

I resigned myself to accepting the clothes.

"Tokiya, so you like things like this"

I could see beads of sweat forming on Tokiya's forehead, probably from having already been forced to choose so many outfits. If he were to ask me if I liked it, I'd have to say no since part of it was red. However, I could also see the desperate effort Tokiya put into choosing it.

In fact, compared to what Tokiya brought before, this was actually preferable. It was a fair compromise since part of it was black. That being the case, I wouldn't argue about it further. I already felt bad for sending Tokiya back again and again. I didn't really want to buy this outfit, but I could at least try it on.

"Wait a moment."

I went into the fitting room and tried on the clothes Tokiya handed me.

But standing in front of the mirror, it really did feel unnatural after all. It wasn't just that I wasn't used to it. Something about it felt fundamentally wrong.

I considered just changing back to my normal clothes, but before that, decided to come out of the fitting room.

Judging by the clothes Tokiya brought so far, he liked bright colors like this. The fact that he brought all those things that didn't suit me probably had something to do with that.

That's why I had to at least let him see me wearing the clothes he brought me.

...B-but it wasn't like I wanted to show Tokiya or anything. I just wanted him to understand that these clothes didn't suit me is all.

Yeah. If I did that, then even Tokiya would understand how amazing the color black was.

I saw the pendant that I had taken out from under my blouse sway in the mirror.

Did I look like this back then too?

It was a fond memory for me now.

The image of myself now reminded me of how I looked that day, and made me remember how I felt.

I was also plenty embarrassed then, and it was the same now. Thinking about that made my face flush red.

Maybe I should stay in the fitting room for a little longer.



“...Finally.”

“Hehehe it was all part of the master plan.”

“What part of it was planned? Look at all your failures.” Akanuma was the only one who didn't share my classmate's overwhelming confidence.

“Making big changes to your hair and style takes courage. That's why you should start by recommended something completely out there first. Once you do that, the other clothes you choose will look more reasonable by comparison, even if they're different from what she usually wears.”

My classmates nodded along with Shinjou's declaration.

I wasn't convinced he had considered things to that extent, but he did have a point. The proof of that was that Saki had taken clothes that she would have otherwise never worn into the fitting room. If I had brought it at the beginning—

"It's not black so I don't like it."

—is what she would have said before sending me back.

"But this is where the grand strategy really begins." Advisor Shinjou ignored my visible relief and poked me in the nose

"Haven't I already done enough?"

"Don't be stupid. It's the exact opposite. She's overcome her hesitation by trying on something she wasn't used to. All you need to do now is bring her even showier clothes!"

"That's impossible! No way."

"It's not impossible. Listen to me Kurusu, our ultimate goal was the tight t-shirt and hotpants we chose at the beginning! If we can't get that, then at least let us see her in the camisole!"

"YEAH!" My classmates raised a loud cheer.

"Brilliant strategy you guys."

"I know, right!?"

"You're not doing all this just to see Maino exposed, are you?"

"O-of course not. Ahahahaha"

Akanuma was speaking with a smile on her face, but it was somehow terrifying.

"I don't even need to see it. Just imagining it is enough."

"Don't even imagine it." I smacked Shinjou and the others on their heads to blow away their delusions of Saki.

"How possessive—"

The guys I hit started making fun of me instead.

"Shut up!"

They all erupted into laughter when I shouted, and in spite of myself, I found myself laughing too. Leaving their clothing choices aside, I was glad they were here. Not that I'd ever tell them that.

Right, leaving that aside, how did Saki like the clothes I picked out?

She didn't always wear clothes that showed little skin. I sometimes saw her wearing sleeveless dresses on hot days, and due to circumstances even wore a cheongsam once.

It's just that all of her clothes were black.

Meaning my goal wasn't to have her wear clothes that exposed her more, but to have her wear something that wasn't black.

It wasn't because black didn't suit her or anything, or that it was a strange. In fact, now that I had gotten used to it, I'd say black suited her best.

But she didn't have to be so attached to it.

Not to steal Shinjou's words, but she took courage to make an image change. I wanted support Saki at least a little bit if nothing else.

Then the curtain to the fitting room opened up with a swish.

As she stepped out, Saki was...

“...What's wrong?”

She was wearing her own clothes.

Saki quietly raised her head— she looked passed me towards Shinjou and the others. She probably still remembered him since they had met before. Going by her lack of confusion, Saki must have heard us from the fitting room.

Shinjou and the others froze as Saki looked at them.

She continued out of the fitting room, walking past me until she was standing in front of Shinjou.

“Shinjou-kun.”

“Y-yes.”

“I'm sorry. You don't know me well so it's understandable, but I didn't like the clothes you chose.”

Saki returned the clothes in her hand to Shinjou.

“O-oh. Sorry about that.”

“Umm, we weren't the one who chose th—”

Saki shutdown Akanuma's protests with a glare.

“Hey, it's not her fault. And why are you so mad about the clothes anyw—”

I started criticizing Saki's attitude, but she was having none of it.

“Tokiya too.”

She finally turned her sights to me.

“You don’t understand anything about me.”

With that scathing remark, Saki turned around and left the store.



Why was I so angry?

I was the one who understood it the least.

I had heard Tokiya and his friends’ voices from the fitting room. When I opened the curtain a little to take a look, I saw him next to a bunch of other guys including Shinjou-kun and one girl.

They were all talking about something.

I couldn’t hear what they were saying exactly, but I could guess that it had been Shinjou and co., not Tokiya who had been choosing the clothes.

I had thought it was strange.

Why would Tokiya ever choose clothes like that?

He knew full well what kind of clothes I liked.

Even if he went out of his way to avoid black, he would have still gotten me something with subdued colors.

So was I angry because Tokiya wasn’t the one who picked out my clothes?

No, that wasn’t it.

This all started because of Towako-san’s outrageous demands anyway. It wasn’t as if I especially wanted Tokiya to choose clothes for me.

I had been enjoying myself before we had even gotten to the store.

It might not have been obvious from looking at me, but I was having a lot of fun.

Waiting at the meeting spot.

Choosing clothes for Tokiya.

Going to the restaurant together.

The two of us going to the bookstore and the accessory shop.

Those childish things were very...very....

“—————”

Ah, so that's what it was.

I finally realized.

Why I was so angry.

Why I felt so irritated.

Why I kept asking Tokiya who he went with at every opportunity.

It was because I finally realized that Tokiya had friends.

Of course, that was something I already knew.

That Tokiya spent lots of time with his friends at school during the day.

That Tokiya always messaged his friends on his phone at work.

That Tokiya hung out with his friends on his off days.

I knew all of that very well.

It wasn't like I just found out today.

But for the first time I felt strongly conscious about it.

Because I happened to see the other side of it.

Because I happened to see Tokiya surrounded by all his friends.

Because I happened to see Tokiya smiling in the middle of it all.

That's what made me feel so self conscious.

Because Tokiya also lived in a world I knew nothing about.

Tokiya had a world he could live in even if I wasn't there.

“So that's what it was.”

Stupid me.

I tried to avoid facing it even though I already knew.

It took me this long to realize something so obvious.

“...It's okay. This is fine.”

Yeah. This was fine.

This was how it was supposed to be.

That's why I had to accept it and be happy.

But even still...I couldn't feel happy about it.

I didn't think I'd be so possessive of him.

...No, I *was* that possessive.

And it took me so long to realize this as well.

I didn't want to monopolize Tokiya to myself.

But if I couldn't monopolize him, then I probably couldn't even live with myself.

...Live with myself?

That wasn't right.

I didn't have anything to believe in.

There wasn't anyone I could trust anymore.

I'd have to stop wanting to monopolize him someday too.

But that was still impossible for me.

That's why I'm sorry Tokiya.

Please indulge my selfishness for now.

But someday.

Some day, for sure...



I tried to send Saki a message but there was no response.

Then I tried calling, but her phone seemed to be off.

She wasn't at Tsukumodo either when I checked.

"Ah."

I ended up hurting Saki back there.

We went out today so Saki could choose clothes for me, and so I could pick out something her. They way it all started might have been dumb, but I had to finish what we started now that things had ended up like this.

I told Saki that she didn't need to get so worked up about clothes.

And I don't think I was wrong about that.

But Saki was probably angry about more than just the clothes.

I had an experience like this before.

It was when my high school friends met up with their middle school friends that I didn't know. Seeing them having fun without me made me feel a little alienated and upset.

Maybe Saki felt like that too.

For someone who didn't have many friends like her, she must have felt it even more strongly than I did.

I shouldn't have let her see that.

Especially not on a day like this.

"You don't understand anything about me."

I had to face what Saki said directly. All the more so because I wanted to understand her better. Because I didn't know why she would say something like that after all the time we spend together.

"What am I supposed to do?"

I held up the leaf to the familiar light of my own house. The beautiful *Kotonoha* leaf shined with the colors of the rainbow in the light.

If I tried to put my apology in *Kotonoha* now, would it reach Saki?

It probably would.

My words themselves would reach her.

But even if they did get to her ears, I didn't know if it would reach her heart.

I didn't even have a way to know if my words resonated with her.

Thinking about it further made me feel powerless once again.



I heard the doorbell ring.

Not for the store, but for the house.

Towako-san was away so it fell to me to answer the door.

Who could it be at this time of day? Probably a delivery person or door to door salesman.

“Who is it?”

I opened the door a just a crack, but didn’t see anyone there.

Instead, there was a single paper bag. It looked like a delivery.

I opened the door and picked up the bag.

Inside of it was a large box. I opened it and took our a dress.

It was black, like the dresses I usually wore.

However.

This dress was the newest design from a shop that I frequented.

The person who sent me this must have heard about it while they were in the fitting room.

Then I noticed that the receipt was still in the bag.

That was dumb. What kind of person would leave a receipt along with a present? I pulled it out of the bag to take a closer look.

It was from the flagship store.

The date was today.

The time was 10 o’clock this morning—right around the time the store opened.

Today was Monday, so the person who bought must have had to skip school.

He didn’t have to go that far.

You’ll spoil me by doing things like this, Tokiya.

Then I noticed something shining in one of the dress pockets.

I took a closer look and saw that it was a single seven colored leaf. The moment I touched it, a warm light enveloped me.

“This dress suits you the best”

He was trying to hide his embarrassment, but that’s all the message said. The image of Tokiya and his words disappeared and my surroundings went back to normal.

What a waste.

And this was one of the precious few Relics Towako-san gave us.

Was this really something he wanted me to know, but couldn't tell me?

And more than anything...

"You should at least look at me and say these things to my face."

I smiled bitterly in my heart at Tokiya, who had been looking away even in the image *Kotonoha* showed me.



"You should say this sort of thing face to face."

"...You're right, I should."

I replied to Saki's muttering and came out from my hiding place.

"You had a backup plan, how sneaky."

"It's because I didn't know how else to talk to you. You weren't picking up your phone."

"Ah."

In a rare moment for her, Saki actually looked surprised.

"I forgot to turn the phone back on."

"Huh?"

"Remember when the TV crew was at the teashop? They asked us to turn off our phones."

"From back then..."

I thought she had turned it off when she stormed out of the store. So I was just overthinking it.

"You should have just come here directly."

"You've got to me kidding me."

If I didn't have *Kotonoha*, then I probably would have done that first. However because I *did* have *Kotonoha*, I was stuck thinking about how to use it most effectively.

In the end, Relics do bring misfortune to people who use them after all.

Relying on them was no good. I should have scrounged up what little courage I had and come here first.

“I win by default.”

“Huh?”

Saki suddenly said something that made no sense, and I unintentionally let out a puzzled response. She was pointing at me with an air of superiority.

“Ah...”

I finally realized what Saki was talking about. It was my clothes. I was wearing the ones she chose for me yesterday.

Well, it was all about earning whatever brownie points I could. A toast to my cunning for having a backup plan on top of my other plans!

“But how exactly did I lose?”

“Oh, but you bought these clothes for me, didn’t you?”

Saki triumphantly held the dress I skipped school for to buy first thing in the morning in front of her.

“Okay okay. It’s my loss.” A raised my hand to surrender.

“Don’t you have school today?”

“It’s Memorial Service Day so we have the rest of the day off.”

“Alright, why don’t we go into the store then?”

Saki kept the dress in her hands and went inside.

“Saki.”

“What is it?”

“*That dress suits you the best*”

“!”

Saki, the very person who told me to say it to her face, turned around in a fluster so I could only see her back.

“Wh-what was that, saying that right in front of me...”

“You were the one who told me to do it.”

“Oh right. I forgot.” She snapped at me and went inside holding the clothes I bought her.

Saki was being a bit unreasonable with her protests, but it wasn't a bad feeling.

I followed her inside the house, and before anything else, looked for the *Kotonoha* leaf.

It wasn't here.

Saki must have kept it when she took the dress with her.

That was a problem.

"Hey, Saki. Give me that *Kotonoha* back."

Saki spun around to face me and stuck out her tongue.

"You can't take back the words you sent me."

Kotonoha shined the colors of the rainbow in Saki's hands.

It was true that I couldn't take back the words I said, but she didn't plan on returning *Kotonoha* either.

This was an utter loss for me. All I had left now was my embarrassment.

I didn't even want to think about what would happen if Saki showed Towako-san my message. I'd never live it down.

"Just give it to me already!"

Saki didn't respond to me shouting and walked away with the dress—and *Kotonoha* with it.

...Turns out Relics bring nothing but misfortune after all.



Afterwords

Tsukumodo Antique Shop has made it to its fifth volume. How about that?

I've temporarily moved house due to circumstances and this manuscript was born in Nagoya, which I had never been to before.

My source of energy has been hitsumabushi, miso katsu, miso nikomi udon, ankake spaghetti, and finally, Nagoya style chicken wings. Having fulfilling meals is a good thing I'd say. All I did was eat out though.

I plan on keeping up the hard work fueled by Nagoya cuisine.

Now I'd like to talk a little about the stories in this volume.

Luck

Tokiya and Saki find a lucky bangle on a blog site that apparently brings good luck to its user. There are various types of lucky bangles with varying effects, and Tokiya searches for the owner to find out what specific power this one has.

The misfortunes that appeared the story (how the train leaves the station right in front of you, or traffic lights turning red as soon as you arrive) are all things that I always find myself thinking about. In reality that sort of thing doesn't happen often, but I still end up feeling like it's bad luck. Have you had thoughts like that as well?

Hope

A *Calamity Jar* for which the lid must never be opened. A Relic that Tokwako purchased has a hidden secret.

It's a story made with a certain motif in mind. Tsukumodo's take on it was inspired by the circumstances that led to myths and folktales, as well as the stories behind proverbs and sayings. The rest was simply my imagination.

That's all I'll have to say about it.

Words

Tokiya and Saki find themselves in a place they've never seen before when they open their eyes. Behind the story that unfolds before the two lies yet another hidden secret about the *Calamity Jar*. It's a rare moment for Tsukumodo where a story stretches over two chapters.

If there are people that read chapters out of order, I'd suggest reading chapter two before chapter three (that should be obvious, right?)

True Thoughts

Due to Towako's plot (idea?), Tokiya and Saki go out to buy clothes for one another, which then leads to awkward situations. Tokiya tries to look good for Saki, but that causes her to doubt him.

This is our usual story of misunderstandings, but it made me remember something from when I was writing the first volume. I wasn't sure it would be a good idea to include a fourth chapter that had a completely different atmosphere from the first three, but at the same time I also wanted to have a story that emphasized Saki's good points. Now that the pattern has been firmly established, I feel like I made the right choice.

I have to praise my past self for that decision.

And like that, the fifth volume is finally over; I hope you found it enjoyable.

Finally, I'd like to take a moment to show my appreciation.

To my editor Takabayashi-san who's always looking out for me. To Takeshima Satoshi for the hard work I kept putting him through. To all the people who made this book possible, and last but not least, my readers for buying this book.

Thank you very much. The questionnaires and fan letters I received made me happy indeed.

With that, let's meet again in the next volume.

-Akihiko Odou